

THE GARDEN



Books by
V. SACKVILLE-WEST

Poetry

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KING'S DAUGHTER
COLLECTED POEMS
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THE EDWARDIANS
ALL PASSION SPENT
GRAND CANYON

V. SACKVILLE-WEST

The Garden



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V. S-W.

Dedication

TO

KATHERINE DRUMMOND

How well I know what I mean to do
When the sweet moist days of Autumn come:
Clear my garden of wicked weeds
And write a poem to give to you.

A long, rank poem of autumn words,
Looking over the summer and spring.
My age is autumn, and yours is—what?
Winter? ah no, that's another thing.

Yours is the year that counts no season;
I can never be sure what age you are.
A girl in her running moods, no reason?
A woman of wisdom crepuscular?

Lover of words for their English beauty,
Lover of friends for their tested bond,
(Oh faithful tolerant heart, so rare
In visions of virtue, seen beyond!
Seen beyond cheapness, seen beyond meanness,
Meagre estimates not in your score.
Credit the others, make yourself debtor,
Lest in the total you might poll more!)

Lover of woods, of words, of flowers,
Lover yourself of the things I love,
Friendship was made of the quiet hours
Hung between earth and the sky above.

Flowers and clouds and the last unknown,
All in your garden or soft deep room
Where peace obtained and the window showed
On a twilight gloom that was not gloom.

DEDICATION

You loved me too, as I like to think;
I felt your love as a benediction
In tranquil branches above me spread,
Over my sometimes troubled head,
A cedar of Lebanon, dark as ink,
And grave as a valediction..

You are the wise, the brave, the gentle;
The rivulets of my many moods
Flowed unchecked by your quiet chair
As the freshet flows through the watching woods.

Ah, could I tell you, ah, could I give you
Half of the strength you have given to me!
Half of a garden, half of a poem,
Then would the rivulet run to the sea.

But how well I know what I really do
When St. Martin's golden Summer comes:
I pull no weed from my garden slums
And write no poem that's fit for you.

Hide in the woods instead, and dream
As the beeches turn to their autumn brown
And acorns plop in the swollen stream;
Sit on a rotting log; scrawl down
Rubbish of verses fit for fire,
Gardener, poet, on single pyre,
Liberal, losel, catching the last
Chance of the mothlike summer past,—
Winter's ahead, and our days are few.

Failing as gardener, failing as poet,
Giving so little to all I love,
What have I done with my life as I know it,
A shortening beat on a short patrol?

How to detect the advance of age,
The growth of the moss on the hoary soul,
The loss of the generous early rage,
The drab of hoping no more from life,
Which marks the transit from youth to sage?

THE GARDEN

What did we ever expect from life?
Fame? adventure? a tranquil bliss?
Ah no, it was never those varied things,
The stocks that soar or the lark that sings;
It was the ardour that lit the whole,
Not expectation of that or this.

Age is the loss of that early zest;
The onset of age is the flame gone low;
Signs of the end, of the deathly rest
Sought in the pianissimo
By a heart gone weak and a spirit tired
From the long delusion of things desired.

That is an age which has laid no touch
On your silver hair or your laughing eyes;
Tarnished you not with sardonic smutch,
For your heart is young though it may be wise,
And your spirit is still intuitive.

So take the little I have to give,
Here in a poem to fill your leisure
Where every word is lived and true.
The weeds in my garden remain as green,
And I cannot tell if I bring you pleasure,
But the little patch I have cleared for you,
That one small patch of my soul is clean.



*The
Garden*

Small pleasures must correct great tragedies,
Therefore of gardens in the midst of war
I boldly tell. Once of the noble land
I dared to pull the organ-stops, the deep
Notes of the bass, the diapason's range
Of rich rotation, yielding crop by crop;
Of season after season as the wheel
Turned cyclic in the grooves and groves of time;
I told the classic tools, the plough, the scythe,
In husbandry's important ritual,
But now of agriculture's little brother
I touch the pretty treble, pluck the string,
Making the necklace of a gardener's year,
A gardener's job, for better or for worse
Strung all too easily in beads of verse.
No strong no ruthless plough-share cutting clods,
No harrow toothèd as the saurian jaws,
Shall tear or comb my sward of garden theme,
But smaller spade and hoe and lowly trowel
And ungloved fingers with their certain touch.

(Delicate are the tools of gardener's craft,
Like a fine woman next a ploughboy set,
But none more delicate than gloveless hand,
That roaming lover of the potting-shed,
That lover soft and tentative, that lover
Desired and seldom found, green-fingered lover
Who scorned to take a woman to his bed.)

THE GARDEN

So to such small occasions am I fallen,
And in the midst of war,
(Heroic days, when all the pocket folk
Were grabbed and shaken by a larger hand
And lived as they had never lived before
Upon a plane they could not understand
And gasping breathed an atmosphere too rare,
But took it quickly as their native air,
Such big events
That from the slowly opening fount of time
Dripped from the leaky faucet of our days,)
I tried to hold the courage of my ways
In that which might endure,
Daring to find a world in a lost world,
A little world, a little perfect world,
With owlet vision in a blinding time,
And wrote and thought and spoke
These lines, these modest lines, almost demure,
What time the corn still stood in sheaves,
What time the oak
Renewed the million dapple of her leaves.

Yet shall the garden with the state of war
Aptly contrast, a miniature endeavour
To hold the graces and the courtesies
Against a horrid wilderness. The civil
Ever opposed the rude, as centuries'
Slow progress laboured forward, then the check,
Then the slow uphill climb again, the slide
Back to the pit, the climb out of the pit,
Advance, relapse, advance, relapse, advance,
Regular as the measure of a dance;

THE GARDEN

So does the gardener in little way
Maintain the bastion of his opposition
And by a symbol keep civility;
So does the brave man strive
To keep enjoyment in his breast alive
When all is dark and even in the heart
Of beauty feeds the pallid worm of death.

Much toil, much care, much love and many years
Went to the slow reward; a grudging soil
Enriched or lightened following its needs:
Potash and compost, stable-dung, blood, bones,
Spent hops in jade-green sacks, the auburn leaves
Rotted and rich, the wood-ash from the hearth
For sticky clay; all to a second use
Turned in a natural economy,
And many a robin perched on many a sod
Watched double-trenching for his benefit
Through the companionable russet days,
But only knew the digger turned the worm
For him, and had no foresight of the frost
Later to serve the digger and his clod
Through winter months, for limitations rule
Robins and men about their worms and wars,
The robin's territory; and man's God.

But the good gardener with eyes on ground
(Lifted towards the sunset as he scrapes
His tools at day's end, looks into the west,
Examining the calm or angry sky
To reckon next day's chance of fair or ill,
Of labour or of idleness enforced,)

THE GARDEN

Sees only what he sees, oh happy he!
Makes his small plot his arbiter, his bourn,
Being too lightly built to suffer pain
That's unremitting, pain of broken love,
Or pain of war that tears too red a hole.
He will endure his trials willy-nilly,
The plaguy wind, the cold, the drought, the rain,
All, to his mind, ill-timed and in excess,
But finds a sanctuary. He knows, he knows
The disappointments, the discomfitures,
The waste, the dash of hopes, the sweet surprise
Sprung in forgotten corner; knows the loss,
Attempts defeated, optimism balked;
He may not pause to lean upon his spade,
And even in the interruption brought
By friends, he will not stroll
At simple ease, but ever dart his eyes
Noticing faults, and feeling fingers twitch,
Eager to cut, to tie, correct, promote,
Sees all shortcomings with the stranger's eye,
An absent-minded host with inward fret,
The most dissatisfied of men, whose hope
Outran achievement and is leading yet.

(Still there are moments when the shadows fall
And the low sea of flowers, wave on wave,
Spreads to the pathway from the rosy wall
Saying in coloured silence, "Take our all;
You gave to us, and back to you we gave.

¹"You dreamed us, and we made your dream come true.
We are your vision, here made manifest.

THE GARDEN

You sowed us, and obediently we grew,
But, sowing us, you sowed more than you knew
And something not ourselves has done the rest.”)

Unlike the husbandman who sets his field
And knows his reckoned crop will come to birth
Varying but a little in its yield
After the necessary months ensealed
Within the good the generative earth,

The gardener half artist must depend
On that slight chance, that touch beyond control
Which all his paper planning will transcend;
He knows his means but cannot rule his end;
He makes the body: who supplies the soul?

Sometimes, as poet feels his pencil held,
Sculptor his chisel cutting effortless,
Painter his brush behind his grasp impelled,
Unerring guidance, theory excelled,
When rare Perfection gives a rounded Yes,

So does some magic in his humbler sphere,
Some trick of Nature, slant of curious light,
Some grouped proportion, splendid or severe
In feast of Summer or the Winter sere,
Show the designer one thing wholly right.

Music from notes and poetry from verse
Grow to a consummation rare, entire,
When harmony resolves without disperse
The broken pattern of the universe
And joins the particles of our desire.

THE GARDEN

Hint of the secret synthesis that lies
So surely round some corner of our road;
That deepest canon of our faith, the prize
We look for but shall never realise;
Suspected cipher that implies a code.

Rosetta Stone of beauty come by chance
Into the testing hands of gardener's loves,
Rich hieroglyphic of significance
Only denied to our poor ignorance.
—Those orchards of Rosetta and their doves!

Should we resolve the puzzle, lose the zest,
Should we once know our last our full intent,
If all were staringly made manifest,
The mystery and the elusive quest,
Then less than ever should we be content.

The Morning Glory climbs towards the sun
As we by nature sadly born to strive
And our unending race of search to run,
Forever started, never to be won,
—And might be disappointed to arrive.



Blackout.

*Quiet. The tick of clock
Shall bring you peace,
To your uncertain soul
Give slow increase.*

*The blackened windows shut
This inward room
Where you may be alone
As in the tomb.*

*A tomb of life not death,
Life inward, true,
Where the world vanishes
And you are you.*

*War brings this seal of peace,
This queer exclusion,
This novel solitude,
This rare illusion,*

*As to the private heart
All separate pain
Brings loss of friendly light
But deeper, darker gain.*

Not only war, but natural Winter carries
This valuable and enforced retreat,
As monks will seek in contemplation's cell
An increment of quiet holiness,
Prolonged novena,—so the Winter gives
A blameless idleness to active hands
And liberates the vision of the soul.
Darkness is greater light, to those who see;

THE GARDEN

Solitude greater company to those
Who hear the immaterial voices; those
Who dare to be alone.

Yet there are days when courage, hardly pressed,
Staggers to meet the unaccountable foe
More dangerous than known danger; days when cold
Frightens with lack of mercy, days when sleet
Blinds as an evil and obscuring thing,
The very enemy of sight and light,
A force iniquitous, an infamy
Whose only lust is ruin; days when murk
Darkens before the clock's expected hour
And blows the little taper of our cheer;
Days when the wind, which once was summer breeze,
Rips through the canvas of the air, with fangs
Savaging the poor shelter of our house;
Days when our gentle and habitual friends
The trees, the roads, take part in enmity,
Trees twisting roots that in the summer held
The reading schoolboy in their hammock slung
Over the stream, but now like pythons wreath
Waiting to rack new sons of Laocoön;
When lanes that led us to the lighted pane
Now in their frozen malice make us fall;
When the mild hills that big as guardians stood
Watching our valley, take another shape
Or hide themselves entire, so we, not seeing
But knowing only that they still are there,
Wonder what transformation huge and bad
Corrupts them in their cloud, and in our awe
Cower, and push our fearful thought away.

WINTER

It is not Winter, not the cold we fear;
It is the dreadful echo of our void,
The malice all around us, manifest;
Loud-mouthed interpreter of constant whispers
Mostly ignored, or drowned within the song
Of cheerfulness and shallow disregard.
The athletic spirit, like a shouting boy,
Leaps to all reassurance, shuns the dour
Disquiet plucking mutely at his sleeve,
And seeks the climate native to his mind
Where day suffices day, but even he
When lowering Nature grips, must vacillate
Disconsolate before the frightful day
With a strange wonder and a strange alarm.

No natural dread, no dread of age or death,
—Tractable phantoms do they both appear—
But an unmanageable intimation
Arousing with an apprehended call
That rabble in the basement of our being,
Ragged and gaunt, that seldom rush to light
But in a cellar with the scurrying rats
Live out their bleached existence till the cry
Whistles them up the stairs, the curs, the beggars,
And sets them running in a pack released
To chase the frightened rabbit of the soul.

Not always thus, for the resilient heart
Thankfully lifts, the richer for that hour.
Let but one gleam and promise of the sun
Redly dissolve the mist, unfreeze the lane
And put some colour back where there was none,

THE GARDEN

Then in our pathos do we lift our eyes
And tread with confidence our usual path
Fearing no treachery; then we behold
Beauty return with colour and with shape,
(As beauty, for completeness, must observe.)

Then will the fine-drawn branches of the Winter
Stretch fingers of a lean but generous hand
Against a morning sky of cloud where mingle
Doves and flamingoes, over pented roofs
Of clustered homestead with its barns and lichen
Green in the rain but golden in the sun;
The great red threshing engine standing ready
Out in the stack-yard, and the green tarpaulin
Tossed as a tent above the waiting ricks,
So viridescent, it repeats the lichen;
The cottages repeating all the apples
That ever hung with cheeks towards the sun.

Quiet you down, you troubled soul; lie down
As patient dog when bidden, in a corner;
Forget those days when you could not control
Something that rose unbidden and unknown.
Seize on your comfort when you may; resume
The little things that match your little scheme,
And, as you travel on your country road
And see the bonfire blazing from the brish
To match the sunrise scarlet in the sky
With smoke as full and blue as plumes of swan,
(Since white is blue in shadow), leave your fear,
Let the brief terror go, and turn again
To the more comfortable daily rule.

WINTER

*. . . As once in childhood, when the creep of dusk
Peopled the hedges with a breed of shapes,
And pollard willows turned to knarly apes,
The hollies to a host of men in capes,
And whitened birch-pole to a sharpened tusk,*

*The stump of chestnut to a manikin,
The tufted elm to an advancing bear,
The very ditch to some unseemly lair,
—Then, when a lighted window showed its square,
A sudden token of the peace within,*

*The room we knew, security entire,
Leapt as a picture, self-contained, complete,
A sanctuary to our running feet,
A box of walls, a rational retreat,
But most of all the warm, the fendered fire,*

*The fire our friend, that symbol since the cave,
Which on a wintry morning, still half-dark,
In roadside fireside when our days are stark
But bonfire brishings of the hedges spark,
Touches our childish heart, and makes us brave.*

Winter. What's Winter? Is it cowardly
To draw the curtain on the misery
Of outward day? shut out the tears of rain
And wind-dishevelled ancient hair of trees
And soaked garden seen through window-pane?
Oh no! for here a different pleasure offers;
Here may we dream of different beauty seen,

THE GARDEN

Desired though not fulfilled, that final beauty
Denied to all our scheming as we know
Too well, yet still delude ourselves in vision
Unreasonable, in pathetic faith
As the advancing soul, abashed, disheartened,
Loses itself in night to reach a day
Resplendent after darkness,—so in Winter
The gardener sees what he will never see.

Here, in his lamp-lit parable, he'll scan
Catalogues bright with colour and with hope,
Dearest delusions of creative mind,
His lamp-lit walls, his lamp-lit table painting
Fabulous flowers flung as he desires.
Fantastic, tossed, and all from shilling packet
—An acre sprung from one expended coin,—
Visions of what might be.

We dream our dreams.
What should we be, without our fabulous flowers?
The gardener dreams his special own alloy
Of possible and the impossible.

He dreams an orchard neatly pruned and spurred,
Where Cox' Orange jewels with the red
Of Worcester Permain, and the grass beneath
Blows with narcissus and the motley crocus,
Rich as Crivelli, fresh as Angelo
Poliziano, or our English Chaucer
Or Joachim du Bellay, turn by turn.
He dreams again, extravagant, excessive,
Of planted acres most unorthodox
Where Scarlet Oaks would flush our English fields

WINTER

With passionate colour as the Autumn came,
Quercus coccinea, that torch of flame
Blown sideways as by some Atlantic squall
Between its native north America
And this our moderate island. Or again
He dreams of forests made of flow'ring trees
Acre on acre, thousands in their pride,
Cherry and almond, crab and peach and plum,
Not like their working cousins grown for use
But in an arrant spendthrift swagger cloak
Squandered across th' astonished countryside.

What woodlands here! No beech, no sycamore,
No rutted chestnut, no, nor wealden oak,
Trunks rising straight from sun-shot, shade-flecked
ground,
Elephants' legs, set gray and solid-round,
No green-brown distance of the mossy ride,
But tossing surf of blossom, frothy heads,
Lather of rose, of cream, of ice-green white,
Vapour and spindrift blown upon the air,
Scudding down rides and avenues more fair
Even than usual woodlands in the Spring
Or at the Summer's height;
(That's saying much, God knows; though saying only
A truth to him who through the woodland goes
Rapt, but aware; alone yet never lonely;
And all the changes of their movement knows.)

Oh these imagined woods in a clear treble
Pure as a boy's voice, purer than a woman's,
With coral deepening those high, light notes
Of white and pink and rose and palest yellow:

THE GARDEN

They are more lovely than known loveliness,
They are the consummation of a vision
Seen by rare travellers on Tibetan hills
—Bitter escarpments cut by knives of wind,
Eaves of the world, the frightful lonely mountains,—
Or in Yunnan and Sikkim and Nepal
Or Andes ranges, over all this globe
Giant in travelled detail, dwarf on maps;
Forrest and Farrer, Fortune, Kingdon-Ward,
Men that adventured in the lost old valleys,
Difficult, dangerous, or up the heights,
Tired and fevered, blistered, hungry, thin,
But drunk enough to set a house on fire
When the last moment of their worthless quest
Startled them with reward, a flash as sudden
As the king-fisher's blue on English stream.

(They say, such travellers were suspect there
Where none would come for other quest than gold
Or trade, that other token form of gold.
Gold may mean different things to different men.
To one man, it could mean the Golden Bell,
Forsythia suspensa, hanging yellow
Along bare branches, such a natural gold
Paying no dividend, as in our cold
Dark February, alien golden bells
Deepen our pale young sunlight, gild our frost,
Since that lone raider rang his useless bells of gold.)

And this, in these invented woods, may take
The place of underwood, replace the tall
Thirteen-year chestnut, fit for poles and spiles;

WINTER

Here is romance, in this imagined forest,
These different rides of laylock and Forsythia;
Azalea in a peaty soil; magnolia
Cupping its goblets down the narrow aisles;
Vines and solanum wreathing Silver Birches,
Wild waving overhead, to lift the eyes
Surfeited with the wealth on lower level.

Think, and imagine: this might be your truth;
Follow my steps, oh gardener, down these woods.
Luxuriate in this my startling jungle.
I dream, this winter eve. A millionaire
Could plant these forests of a poet's dream.
A poet's dream costs nothing; yet is real.

The gardener sits in lamplight, soberer
Than I who mix such lyrical and wild
Impossibilities with what a sober man
Considers sense. Yet I, poor poet, I
Am likewise a poor practised gardener
Knowing the Yes and better still the No.
Sense must prevail, nor waste extravagant
Such drunken verse on such December dreams.

Yet I do find it difficult indeed
To break away from visions in this drear
Winter of northern island. I must love
The warmer sun and with nostalgia pine
For those my birthright climates on the coast
Mediterranean of southern Spain.

THE GARDEN

Homesick we are, and always, for another
And different world.

And so the traveller
Down the long avenue of memory
Sees in perfection that was never theirs
Gardens he knew, and takes his steps of thought
Down paths that, half-imagined and half-real,
Are wholly lovely with a loveliness
Suffering neither fault, neglect, nor flaw;
By visible hands not tended, but by angels
Or by St. Phocas, gentlest patron saint
Of gardeners. . . . Such wisdom of perfection
Never was ours in fact though ours in faith,
And since we live in fabric of delusion
Faith may well serve a turn in place of fact.

Luxury of escape! In thought he wanders
Down paths now more than paths, down paths once seen.
Gold is their gravel, not the gold that paves
Ambition's highway; velvet is their green;
Blue is the water of the tide that laves
Their island shore where terraces step steep
Down to the unimaginable coves
Where wash on silver sand the secret seas.
Above such coves, such seas, he strays between
Straight cypresses or rounded orange-trees,
And sees a peasant draw a pail from deep
Centennial well; and finds a wealth in these.

Across the landscape of his memory
Bells ring from distant steeples, no cracked bell
Marring the harmony, but all as pure
As that spring-water drawn from that clear well.

WINTER

What time the English loam is bare and brown
Elsewhere he roams and lets his reason drown
In thought of beauty seen. There was a key
Opened an iron door within the wall
Of the thick ramparts of a fortress town
Where the great mountains sudden and remote
Like clouds at tether rose,
But the near larkspur seemed as tall
Dashing her spire of azure on their snows;
And, wandering, he might recall
Another garden, seen as in a moat
Reflected, green, and white with swans afloat,
Shut in a wood where, mirrored sorrowful,
A marble Muse upon her tablets wrote.

Look, where he strays!
Images, like those slow and curving swans,
Sail sensuous up, and these drab northern days,
This isle of mist, this sun a shield of bronze,
Melt in the intenser light away.

Or, as his vision grows particular
In focus of his lamplight, he may see
Detail of gardens in his little lens,
Bright in their miniature.
Gardens of Persia, where the thin canal
Runs in transparency on turquoise tiles
Down to the lost pavilion, broken, spoilt,
Decaying as the peach and almond wake
Beneath the snow-white mountains when the Spring
Melts snow, and water and the blossom break.

THE GARDEN

Or he may see the great Escorial,
Barrack fanatical, and smell the box
Hot in the August sun; or pace the strait
Paths of the Generalife, oddly hitched
To scarps where all the nightingales of Spain
Sing to the moon, or in some dark Italian
Garden find symphonies of leaves and water:
The ilex, and the fountain, and the cool
Nymph dipping marble foot in living pool.

Gardens of the ideal, the sole Kingdom;
All his, attained, possessed, held beyond loss.
Take a prince prisoner and make him yours!
Princely he roves, but with a soft nostalgia
Sweetening half the pain that it embalms,
—As some young simple soldier, far from home,
Goes walks down cottage paths, and speaks no word
Of flowers he perceived or birds he heard,
But holds that corner of his exiled heart
Private for that rare pious pilgrimage
When he with his true self may live apart.

Thus do I love my England, though I roam.
Thus do I love my England: I am hers.
What could be said more simply? As a lover
Says of his mistress, I am hers, she mine,
So do I say of England: I do love her.
She is my shape; her shape my very shape.
Her present is my grief; her past, my past.
Often I rage, resent her moderate cast,
Yet she is mine, I hers, without escape.
The cord of birth annexes me for ever.

WINTER

And so when long and idle winter dusk
Forces me into lamplight, I must make
Impracticable beauty for my England.

Ah dreams, impracticable dreams! What dreams
Lie buried in that box all gardeners know,
Labels that once belonged to living plants
But now like little tombstones set aside
Rest on a shelf, nor wait another morn.

They're dead; we could not grow them; they are dead;
Dead as a finished love that will not throw
Fresh shoots again beyond that fine first burst
Of love or spring of year.

Small cemetery,

These labels were our hopes; we saw them grow
Into a loveliness we cannot know.
The catalogues misled us, as a poem
Misleads us, or the promises of love;
We heard their music, and as chords they go.

Box of the Dead, these labels sadly pulled
From base of shrivelled plants, yet set aside
For that bright day when death may be replaced
By youngling surging on another tide.

Book of the Dead, that private catalogue
Of hope defeated, list of hope and droop.
Oh what a book is that! a year-by-year
Order from nurserymen, expensive, modest;
The cost meant nothing where the love meant all.

Modest we are in hope, and in defeat
Docile and sad, but still renewed in hope.

THE GARDEN

What lovely names in that Dead Book survive,
Names that might be the names of those we loved, and
died;
Forever dead, and never could revive.

Winter must be the season that induces
Such melancholy, and the heart seduces
Towards a feast of pleasure and of pain;
And I remember once a stranger said,
Trudging about my garden when the snow
Had laid a thin and ugly film, "I know
You think your garden shameful now, and wilt
As this intruder witnesses your guilt,
But I like winter best, for in the plain
Ground where the shortened stalks look dead
I read the labels with a greater ease,
And with the eye of faith
See better life than any life, for these
Who have the look of death."

Oh delicate heart! I never knew your name.

Truth is not wholly truth, that only truth observes.
There is a finer truth that sometimes swerves,
And like reflections in a bandy mirror
Astonishes through very twist of error.

*Beauty's not always in a scarlet robe.
She wears an old black shawl;
She flouts the flesh and shows the bone
When winter trees are tall.
More beautiful than fact may be
The shadow on the wall.*

WINTER

*Beauty's not always prinked in all her vaunt;
It pleases her to speak
In basic whisper to an ear
That will not find her bleak;
The hearing ear, the seeing eye
Who catch her signs oblique.*

*Oh, fairer than young harlot Summer proud
This subtle, crooked, wise
Old Winter croaks a different truth
Scorning the sensuous lies;
Etches the finer skeleton
For more perceptive eyes.*

The moody seasons with their lift and fall!
A light comes through the mist, and all
Is painted by the great brush of the sun.
He goes behind a cloud, and all is dun.

Strange, yet not passing strange, that our poor mood
(Too finely balanced for a world too crude)
Should suffer shade and sunlight as a wood
Now lit in shafts, now light-less, flat, and stale.

Our mood is Nature's, and ourselves too frail.

Gardener, dwell not long on Book of Dead,
Nor yet on desperate mood beneath the lamp;
Think, rather, of the triumph when you said
“I drained this sodden bed and saved from damp.”
These were the long laborious tasks you did;
These are the practical; the small
Pert boasting Jacks against the Giants tall

THE GARDEN

Of winter trees, as bony and as harsh
As knuckled willows lining Romney Marsh.

But frost will come, and if you well prepare
Your trenching, never taken unaware
By that strange metalled grip
That steals the vigil of your guardianship
And does the second half of work begun
And changes every aspect while the sun
Founders incarnadine, to reappear
Paler with morning, on an earth forlorn
But magical with mystery of mist
When frozen cobwebs hang from frozen thorn
Stiff in their frailty,—then you may rejoice
That at the cost of aching spine and wrist
You took November foresight as your choice
And laid your garden ready as a feast
For frost to finger, and through clods to run.

Frost! Use as friend; forestall as enemy.
A gardener's scrap of wisdom, simply learnt.
Rash maiden growth may be as truly burnt
By chill as fire, to dangle limp and lame.
Young leaves hang seared by frost as though by flame;
See the young tender chestnut in the wood
As though a Goth with torch had passed that way
When the three ice-saints hold their sway
In middle-May:
Saint Boniface, Saint Servais, and the boy
Saint Pancras, martyred long before he came
To manhood, with his fame
Still known to Canterbury in his church,

WINTER

With legendary power to destroy
Orchards of Kent that wither at his name
At coming of his feast-day with the smirch
Of blossom browned and future apples trim
Lost at the touch of his aberrant whim.

Therefore, lest this inclement friend should maim
Your valued plants, plunge pots within a frame
Sunk deep in sand or ashes to the rim,
Warm nursery when nights and days are grim;
But in the long brown borders where the frost
May hold its mischievous and midnight play
And all your winnings of the months be lost
In one short gamble when the dice are tossed
Finally and forever in few hours,
—The chance your skill, the stake your flowers,—
Throw bracken, never sodden, light and tough
In almost weightless armfuls down, to rest
Buoyant on tender and frost-fearing plants;
Or set the wattled hurdle in a square
Protective, where the north-east wind is gruff,
As sensitive natures seek for comfort lest
Th' assault of life be more than they can bear,
And find an end, not in timidity
But death's decisive certainty.

And think on present task for open days.
November sees your digging, rough and brown,
For frost, that natural harrow,
To break your furrows down;
Your spade-wide spits, laborious turned by hand,
So trivial and narrow,

THE GARDEN

Not as the great plough tears the tolerant land,
—An acre while you dig your hundred-yard.
Yes, you may hear, across your tidy hedge
A more majestic tillage, quickly-scarred
Arable, turned by coulter ridge on ridge,
Either by heavy horses or by strong
Tractor with driver on the saddle jarred,
Looking across his shoulder at the long
Wake of the furrow, ever on his guard
To swerve no crooked slip;
So as a straightly-navigated ship
Cutting a paler wake with wedge of prow
Leaves port and makes her landfall and her berth
Against a harbour half-across the Earth,
—Miraculous aiming,—goes the steady plough
From heading down to heading, while you stand
Poor gardener, resting on your spade; your hand
Stretching its fingers as a imprisoned bird
Flaps wings upon release, by freedom stirred.

Envious you may watch; and after dark
When lassitude has counselled you to bed
The day's work done, (as much as any man
Can do with his small tools and his small strength,
Yet, with all effort, what a little span!)
Then you may hear while winter foxes bark
The sound of tractor travelling the length
Steadily up and down, with beam of light
Straight-streaming as a furrow down the night,
Alive with mist-motes, such a stream, a beam
Hitting the opposite hedgerow with a gleam
As sudden as a shot when startled hare

WINTER

Leaps from the stubble . . . But the brightest light
Is silent; and you, gardener, can hear
Only the travelling patient sound, so near
Your garden, (as a lover might reprove
For laxity and laggardness in love,)
Since field and garden, plough and spade, must share,
Different in degree but same in character.

Dead season, when you only can prepare
Doggedly for the future, with no hint
Of bright reward, save in your spirit faint
That still believes prophetic in return
Where the Spring sparkles and the Summers burn;
Quittance of labour, rich in recompense,
Your dividend on capital expense,
The interest you had the right to earn
With golden pounds in place of copper pence
Wrested from Winter's brown by Summer's gold.

Dead season, when you knew the world was old
And you yourself far older, and more cold;
A long, unlit, and lamentable plaint.

Then may you turn for comfort to the wall
Where hangs the Dutchman's canvas, mad and bold,
Fervid with fantasy, insensate brawl
Of all your hopes together bunched in paint:

*Darkest December, when the flowers fail
 And empty tables lack their lucent lading,
 And far beyond the window's rainy veil
 The landscape stretches into twilight fading*

THE GARDEN

*And all seems misted, moribund and pale,
The past too far away for recollection,
The present vacuous, forlorn and stale,
The future far for hope of resurrection,
—Look, then, upon this feast, your eyes regale
On this impossible tumble tossed together,
This freak of Flora's fancy, this all-hail
Regardless of the calendar or weather.
Here is the daffodil, the iris frail,
The peony as blowsy as a strumpet,
The fringed pink, a summer's draggle-tail,
The gentian funnelled as a tiny trumpet.
Here is the hundred-petalled rose, the hale
Straight streaked tulip curving like a chalice,
The lily gallant as a ship in sail,
The sinister fritillary of malice,
With pretty nest of thrush or nightingale,
Peaches and grapes cast careless in profusion
That ev'n in paint their warmed scent exhale
And ripen the extravagant illusion,
All towzled in a crazy fairy-tale
That never blew together in one season
Save where romances over sense prevail,
Yet even here behold the hint of treason:
The small, the exquisite, the brindled snail
Creeping with horny threat towards the foison,
Leaving a glistening, an opal trail,
A smear of evil, signature of poison. . . .*

Yet think not you must be of hope bereft
Even when our steep North has rolled
From the life-giving, colour-giving sun

WINTER

In interval of darkness and of cold,
In loitering length of northern latitude.

Still may you with your frozen fingers cut
Treasures of Winter, if you planted well;
The Winter-sweet against a sheltering wall,
Waxen, Chinese, and drooping bell;
Strange in its colour, almond in its smell;
And the Witch-hazel, *Hamamelis mollis*,
That comes before its leaf on naked bough,
Torn ribbons frayed, of yellow and maroon,
And sharp of scent in frosty English air.

(Why should they be so scented when no insect,
No amorous bee, no evening fitter-moth
Seeks their alluring? Strange, this useless scent!
Shall it charm man alone? an Englishman
Remote from China and her different climate?)

Gardener, if you listen, listen well:
Plant for your winter pleasure, when the months
Dishearten; plant to find a fragile note
Touched from the brittle violin of frost.
Viburnum fragrans, patient in neglect,
That Farrer sent from China;
Patient, and quiet, till, the moment come
When rime all hoar through mist beneath the sun
Turns twigs to little antlers and the grass
To Cinderella's slipper made of glass,—
She breaks, that pale, that fragrant Guelder-rose
As a Court beauty lit at a Court-ball
Sparkled with chandeliers, in muslin youth
Filmy and delicate, yet old as China,

THE GARDEN

Mobled in roseate surprise
That in December hints at apple-blossom.

She shares that paradox of quality
Of blooms that dare the harsh extremity
Of Winter,—a defiance, it may seem,
Challenge of a fragility extreme
In answer to the fiercest enemy.

Consider: all these winter blooms that grace
Astonishing our dismal winter air,
Are delicate as spirits that oppose
Cynical argument with faith more rare
But not, thereby, less true.

Consider the Algerian iris, frail
As tissue-paper stained in lilac-blue,
Sprung at the foot of wall; consider too
Crocus Tomasianus, small, so pale,
Lavender cups of tiny crockery;
The winter aconite with mint of gold
Like new-struck coins that shame the spectral sun
Hung in our jaundiced heaven,—these are frail,
So frail it seems they scarcely could endure
One touch of horrid life and life's fierce wind.

But Winter holds a gem within its folds,
The brightest diamond in the darkest mine,
Christmas! Yet some will say it also holds
Another jewel in the shortest day.

Oh then we look for lengthening; we look
(Knowing full well that mornings are as dark,)
For that blest moment when, surprised, we say
“It still is light!” and take our torchless way.

WINTER

Was it the Feast of the Unconquered Sun,
The Roman feast, that fixed the birth of Christ?
The winter solstice welded into one
With the soul's solstice, when we stand and stare
As the sun pauses to regain his height?
This would be suitable: the darkest hour
Slowly revolving to the growing light
As that strange lovely legend entered first
On one small province of expectant world.
Messiah! . . . With the sun He kept a tryst.
The very sun, that ruler of our joy,
Obeyed the mystic birthday, and in power
Grew with the limbs of Mary's little boy.

These may be fancies; none can know or tell
Why in December rings the village bell;
None knows when Christ was born, or sacrificed,
Nor by what Easter was emparadised.
Small matter, at what time the thought of love
Came timeless here to dwell.

*It was right, it was suitable,
That all should be
Of the utmost simplicity.*

*Stable and star . . .
These deeply are
The things we know.
The raftered barn and the usual sky;
England or Palestine, both the same
But for the name;
And the child's first cry.*

THE GARDEN

*Jesus a baby; the gentle cow
Looking on, ready to give
Her milk if the Virgin's milk should fail.
As then, as now.
Ready to give, that Messiah should live,
Milk for St. Joseph to squirt in the pail.*

*Truths surrounding Him at His birth
When He first drew breath;
Such plain and pastoral truths of the barn and the
earth.
They stood for the cycle of life, though His end was
death,
As the end of us all is death.*

*And their nostrils gently blew,
Smoking on winter air;
—Nostrils of velvet, udders of silk.
Looking over the wall
That divided stall from stall,
They blew soft scent of pasture and herbs and milk
At the child, as at one of their calves.
No incense, or myrrh.*

*Great St. Peter and great St. Paul
Travelled far from the stable stall.
Cathedrals, cardinals, all the state,
All the dogma and all the weight,
All the structure of Church and creed,
When Christ in His greater simplicity
Had already given us all we need.*

WINTER

*It was right, it was suitable,
That all should be
Of the utmost simplicity
At that Nativity.*

And yet, and yet . . . are we not insular,
Relating the familiar to the strange?

I think that Christ was laid in a stone manger,
Not in a manger of warm wood.
It is our English thought that builds of wood
That cosier cot in Palestinian stable;
Our English thought that turns a warm brown barn
Such as we know, into that nursery.

I saw those stone, severe, and Roman mangers
In Timgad, where the Roman horses ate;
And suddenly perceived the likely fact.

Perhaps a little scatter of old straw
Softened that dour, that first prophetic bed;
But stone was His beginning, stone His end.

Pattern of life: the cradle scooped in stone,
That slab of stone at life's end, lying heavy.
Not heavy enough, oh men, oh Roman sentries!
Volatile spirit shifts your lid of stone.

The cradle and the tomb; and in between them
Anguish, and strife, and faith beyond despair.
A resurrection . . . then the pattern wheels
Full cycle back, to find a final limit:
A tomb within the stonier hearts of men.

THE GARDEN

*It snows. How large and soft and slow
The floating flakes that hover down
To find a world of green and brown
And turn it to a world of snow.*

*In slothful squadrons they alight
That seem to loiter on the way
But still resistless steal the day
And change it to a blaze of white*

*And blind the night, and with the dawn
Surprise the looker with the change
That turned his world to something strange
The while he slept with curtains drawn.*

*And still they fall, and still they fall,
A curtain drawn across the skies,
A curtain blinding to the eyes,
That shrouds and shawls a world in pall.*

*And still they fall, the drifting flakes,
As they would never cease in flight
Inexorably soft and slight
Vanquishing all but streams and lakes,*

*Until the moment comes when those
Are levelled to a frozen plain
That checks the water's moving vein
And only snow reflects the rose*

*Of sunrise when no man is by
To see the flush, or at the brink
The thwarted sheep come down to drink,
The disappointed heron fly:*

WINTER

Now for your pleasure and their humble need,
—A double benefit, since you, proud man,
Enjoy the flattery of giving dole
And they, who neither proud nor beggars meek
Will unoffended with imperious beak
Tap in reminder on your window pane
When you, forgetful, richly break your fast
In genial room where hearth and lamplight cast
Their glow on walls though outer world be bleak,—
Set up a table on a solid pole
Outside your window for the ruffled birds.

You may watch them, they you, and who shall say
What thoughts may pass between the minds of each?

But you're superior: you fill a bowl
In careless largess, you the millionaire,
Your pence of crumbs their gold of very life.
Morsels of wealth for morsels of the air.

Yet think not, as you think yourself a lord
Dispensing vail from easy charity,
That you must go without your earned reward.
They, honest debtors, will acquit their score
And you shall not be left the creditor.
Think on the song they gave you, and will give
When the fawn-breasted chaffinch sits once more
On twig-tip perilously perched and singing
Spenser's Epithalamion, and ringing
All bells that ever rang round Easter. . . . Give,
As they will give, who only ask to live.

THE GARDEN

Meanwhile in many dreary months before
That piercing, pure, ineffable sweet note
Startles you on a morning when your need
For resurrection is most urgent, then
When spring calls loud, and sap begins to rise
Up through the trunks of trees and trunks of men,—
Throughout the silent months the silent birds
May bring a pleasure to your watching eyes,
A private, simple pleasure, not for words.
Observe, how dangling blue-tits peck the seed
You saved from stalks of plaintain; and the wren
Small as a mouse and browner than a mouse,
Too light to bend a reed,
Snatches a darting battle in her greed
That is no greed, but hunger, when the cold
Such timorous and anxious mites makes bold.

You watcher at the window, you who know
Life's danger, and how narrow is the line,
How slight the structure of your happiness,
—Think on these little creatures in the snow.
They are so fragile and so fine,
So pitifully small, so lightly made,
So brave and yet so very much afraid.
They die so readily, with all their song.

Yet think not they are friendly or secure
As you with your intentions kind and pure;
Your echoes of Saint Francis down the long
Humane tradition from Assisi borne
In charitable thought of human mind.
Oh no ! they're quarrelsome because forlorn;

WINTER

They fight for life; and, frightened, flit away
Even from your good table, snatching crumbs
To eat within the hedge, however kind
Your meaning be, set up on pole or spike.
It is not you they fear, but one another.

—Christ would have said that bird to bird was brother,
But Christ and Nature seldom speak alike.

It thaws. The hand of Winter slackens grip.
“Wind’s changed,” he said, the old the lonely man
Out in the woods at work before the dawn.
“Wind’s changed.” It seemed as summoning a phrase
As a thanksgiving to an answered prayer.
I looked, and saw above the hill-top pines
Reddened by sunrise, that the whitened vanes
Had swung. “The wind’s gone round,” he surly said,
Stooping to adze his frosty chestnut spiles.

It thaws. The fingers of the Winter drip.
They weaken into water, as a heart
Melted by love. They are no longer cruel.
They change their mind, as wind has changed its mind.
They let the tiles upon the roofs appear,
Brown in their ordinary character;
They let the hedges in their lines appear
Black in their winter custom; let the grass
Show through the snow for hungry sheep to find.
It thaws, and through the night that was so still
When the moon rose above the fields of snow
Now comes the sound of water pouring down
Over the sluice within the dip of valley.

THE GARDEN

Something of beauty goes. This clean clean world
So strangely silent of unwalken snow
Printed by bird-claw and the pad of fox,
Turns to a dirty thing, a compromise,
Patchy and smudged, and all too like our life.

Yet will the anxious peering gardener go,
Looking for broken branches, buckled paths.
He knows that underground his plants are safe
Since snow is warm not cold; and thinks with relish
Of little Alpines in accustomed cot
With their white rug, a northern Silver Fleece,
Not Golden as the ram that flew from Greece.

He knows them safe; but still he greatly fears
Fresh frost to follow on the kindly thaw,
When the dread ice-rain, chain-mail, clattering,
Clothes in a curtain all his tender sprigs—
(Cruelty after kindness comes more harsh
As kindness after cruelty more sweet.)
Also, if he be wise, as gardeners are,
He'll knock the melting snow as hedges bend
Under wet weight, and curtsey to the ground
Flexible wands of yew and edging-box.

And then with thaw comes up the sudden rush
Of growth that waited only on this hour,
On this disclosure of the life beneath.
As the slow secret movement in the life
Of men and nations in their multitude
Blanketed by oppression, poverty,
And lack of light,—oh mostly lack of light—

WINTER

So on a sudden with the genial sun
The aspiration of the myriad crowd
Of pushing leaves and buds within their sheath
Leaps with new motive in a long prepared
Attack to pierce the slowly softening earth.
A gentle mutiny; a pretty change;
Haste without violence; and then a flower
More lovely than mankind has ever brought to birth.

Here leap the leaves, where none before were seen;
Swords of narcissus and of daffodil,
A sheaf of blades, too flexible, too green
(It seems) to thrust their points; yet they appear
From nowhere in a night and with the morn are here.
Likewise the iris, that had sunk to ground
In sodden mass of infelicity
Lifts up her grass-green spear,
And these are signs of spring, that spurious spring
That comes in February to astound
And, against reason, make our hearts believe.

The yellow crocus through the grass will bring
Her light as pointed as a candle flame,
Not there at sunrise, but at midday there.
And snowdrops that increase each year,
Each leaf so tipped with white
As though it too desired to bear a flower.

Now in odd corners you may find
Enough for little bunches, as a child
Will bring you in hot hand a drooping gift
Dragged from the hedges and the cranny wild,
The daisy and the campion and the thrift,

THE GARDEN

Too dead to save, but if your heart be kind
Too dear to throw away
Until the giver on some other quest
Darts off to find a blackbird on her nest
Or, dropped along the road, a wisp of hay.

But these your winter bunches, jealously
Picked on a February morning, they
Are dearer than the plenteous summer. See,
One coloured primrose growing from a clump,
One Lenten rose, one golden aconite,
Dog Toby in his ruff, with varnish bright,
One sprig of daphne, roseate or white,
One violet beneath a mossy stump,
One gold and purple iris, brave but small
Child of the Caucasus, and bind them all
Into a tussie-mussie packed and tight
And envy not the orchid's rich delight.

Shall I count March in Winter? yes, in this
Dear northern island where the sun's late kiss
Comes not till middle April. We believe
Too readily in pledges that deceive.
In one day's promise of a warming air,
In one day's painting by a stronger sun
That on a sudden with a flying flare
Deepens the shadows underneath the arch
And touches all the tips to buds where none
Yesterday showed, and sweeps a generous brush
Across plantations of the ignoble larch,
Across the lovelier copse
With undefinable but certain flush

WINTER

Lingering on the catkins and the tops
Of hazel and the sticky chestnut, when
The small brown things are blown across the ground
Between the fallen twigs and stubs and stones,
—A leaf, a mouse, a wren?—
All in a hurry in the wind of March.

Then in the garden where the skeleton
Leaves of the hornbeam rattle their brown bones
Soon to be pushed aside
As pitiless youth comes on
Shoving and rowdy, crying out “Make way!”
Young savages that mean to have their day,
Those little waves of an audacious tide
That, yesterday unnoted and unseen,
Turned in one night senility’s decay
To the fresh life of inexperienced green,
—Then, gardener, though you be an aged man
And soon to lie where lie the twisted roots,
Seize on your last advantage while you can;
Sing your last lyric with the sappy shoots.

Sow from your packets on the finely-raked
Patches in autumn sweetened with the slaked
Lime that corrects an acid soil
And crumbles obstinate clay
To lessen your stiff toil;
(As the wood-ashes from your open hearth
Piling too high and gray
Will softly lighten and with potash feed
The clamant earth,
From fire’s destruction to creation’s need
Aptly returned.) Sow broad and liberal,

THE GARDEN

But thinly spaced, for plants no less than men
Ask space to be themselves, no sunless den
Where lank and dank they narrow to a weed.
Be generous and nature will repay.
See how one seedling, fallen all by chance
In some forgotten corner, as a stray,
Spreads sturdy as a little bush and takes
A yard of space, no cramping to an inch,
And in its freedom breaks
Into fresh growth without your vigilance
That comes to stop and pinch
And train and foster in the straitened way.

This lesson learn from Nature, and observe.
So might some waif of genius, strangely sprung,
Flower in our English tongue,
Divinely foolish and divinely young;
Some poet from a scrap-heap, some new Keats
Full of wild images and rich conceits,
Breaking untrammelled, from convention free,
Speak the large language that we still deserve.

But you, oh gardener, poet that you be
Though unaware, now use your seeds like words
And make them lilt with colour nicely flung
Where colour's wanted, light as humming-birds;
For these your annuals are light of heart,
Delicate in their texture, brief of life,
Making the most of their impetuous part;
Sweet irresponsibles of youth, or death;
No middle-age; they nothing know between;
No solemn roots for them who riot rife,

WINTER

Flipping their progeny to fates unseen
Wind-borne or bird-borne, fugitive as breath,
Springing where they have fallen in a new
Quick fanfare of existence gaily spent,
None knowing whence they came or where they went,
Only that they were freshened with the dew
And died with frost when Nature proved unkind,
For they had only beauty; only knew
Life in a happy summer; had no mind
For schemes protective when the troubles came,
But died, and left a label with their name.

Their names were nymphs, and they were nymphs indeed,
A whole mythology from pinch of seed.
Nemesia and Viscaria, and that
Blue-as-the-butterfly Phacelia;
Love-in-mist Nigella, whose strong brat
Appears unwanted like a very weed;
Nemōphila,—I knew a little boy
Who called his doll Nemōphila, for joy
In that Greek word he fitted to a toy;
But there's no end within a list that sheds
Petals on summer, seeds on autumn beds,
A list elaborate as chime of bells
Known to the ringer in their composite peal
Where difficult art must difficult skill conceal,
Each separately used but woven in their time
To make the melody of perfect chime
Over the listening landscape richly rolled;
So does the gardener choose a list to hold
Sweet Sultan and Sweet Alyssum that smells
Of sea-cliffs and short turf

THE GARDEN

Where move the cropping sheep
And sea-gulls waver sprinkled round the steep
Crags that descend into the constant surf;
A list of mignonette and marigold
And other pretty things,
But lest you be romancefully inclined
Thinking that beauty unattended springs
All jilly-jolly from your scatterings,
Let dull instruction here remind
That mignonette is tricky, and demands
Firm soil, and lime, to follow your commands,
Else failure comes, and shows a barren space
Where you had looked for small but scented spires.

Yet you more easily may light the fires
Of Summer with the Californian
Poppy, and the Siberian
Wallflower, twanging both their orange lyres
Even too loudly with a lack of grace,
Vulgar but useful (as we mostly are,)
Splashing more sunlight on a sunny place,
A rug of such shrill colour, seen afar
Down the long vista, cast in gold surprise
At foot of yellow lupins that arise
As full of honey as the laden bees
Powdered with pollen on their Ethiop thighs.

Malapert March is parent to all these,
The sowing-time, when warmth begins to creep
Into the soil, as he who handles earth
With his bare hand well knows, and, stooping, feels
The sun on his bare nape, and as he kneels
On pad of sacking knows the stir of birth

WINTER

Even as woman quickened stirs from sleep
And knows before all others in the deep
Instinct's communion that so much reveals,
The rite of the immediate future; so
Does the good gardener sense propitious time
And sows when seeds may grow
In the warm soil that follows on the rime
And on the breaking frost and on the snow.

And then in safety shall he prune
The rose with slicing knife above the bud
Slanting and clean; and soon
See the small vigour of the canted shoots
Strike outwards in their search for light and air,
Lifted above the dung about their roots,
Lifted above the mud.

Yet, unlike fashion's votary, beware
Of pruning so that but the stumps remain,
Miserly inches for the little gain
Of larger flower, exhibition's boast.
Neglect may hold a beauty of her own;
Neglected gardens in these years of war
When the fond owner wandered as a ghost
Only in thought, and longed to cut and trim
Having a vision of his roses prim
As they should be, what time the month was flown,
—Such gardens and their roses over-grown
As never in their careful life before
Flung to the daylight and the scented dark
With no man there to mark
A free and splendid tossing in a host
As unexpected as it had been rare.

THE GARDEN

But winter passes. March is not yet done
Before the solace of a warmer sun
Strokes on our hands and takes us by surprise
With a forgotten touch on naked skin.
The almond breaks to pink against the skies;
Then do we start, and with new-opened eyes
See the true Spring begin.
It flowers in the grass beneath our feet
Where yesterday the colour sparse and thin
Of some rathe daffodil blew here, or there,
Not more than two or three,
Like slender tinkle of a clavecin
In a light sprinkle, single, stray, and rare,
That overnight has flowed into a fleet
Of yellow sails to ride the grassy sea.

Then in a hurry where they all compete
Spearing upon each other's tracks in haste
To catch their chance of life, by sun set free,
—Oh, what intoxication of the air!—
Come crowding all the chaste
And adolescent children of the Spring.
Their music rises like the violin
Taking her place in a full symphony,
Piercing unbearably, so tart, so sweet,
As flying notes upon the air take wing
To twang within our heart an answered string.
Then all the earth is bright with clean and neat
Stars of the Apennine anemone,
And coloured primrose cousin of the mild
Insipid primrose in the wood's retreat,
And varnished celandine, that golden child

WINTER

Unwanted of prolific March; then fling
The sterile cherries in a canopy
Translucent branches over and among
The pavement of the flowers, in a wild
Storm of successive blossom, lightly swung,
So lightly it would seem that they took wing
Also, in notes ethereal, and with Spring
Taught us again the sense of being young.

So March tips over, as a watershed
Where runnels southward send their little race
Towards a greener land, and grow and spread
Till all the fertile veins of water lace
The slopes towards the waiting valley, fed
By snows of Winter, in a hurrying chase
To reach the dry and bony river-bed
And green its banks that like a skeleton
Seemed finally and desperately dead.



“April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.”

Would that my pen like a blue bayonet
Might skewer all such cats'-meat of defeat;
No buttoned foil, but killing blade in hand.
The land and not the waste land celebrate,
The rich and hopeful land, the solvent land,
Not some poor desert strewn with nibbled bones,
A land of death, sterility, and stones.

We know that the ultimate vex is the same for all:
The discrepancy
Between the vision and the reality.
When this has been said, the last sad word is said.
There is nothing to add but the fact that we had the vision,
And this was a grace in itself, the decision
We took between hope and despond;
The different way that we heard and accepted the call;
The different way
We tried to respond.

Let me respond my way, construct my theme
From particles of a different dream,
Be it illusion as well it may.
I would sooner hope and believe
Than dig for my living life a present grave.

THE GARDEN

Though I must die, the only thing I know,
My only certainty, so far ahead
Or just around the corner as I go,
Not knowing what the dangerous turn will bring,
Only that some one day I must be dead,
—I still will sing with credence and with passion
In a new fashion
That I will believe in April while I live.
I will believe in Spring,
That custom of the year, so frail, so brave,
Custom without a loss of mystery.

April the angel of the months, the young
Love of the year. Ancient and still so young,
Lovelier than the craven's paradox;
Christ's Easter and the Syrian Adonis'
When all things turn into their contrary,
Death into life and silence into sound;
When all the bells of Rome
Leap from their Lenten lull, and all the birds,
—Small bells more myriad than the Roman bells;
And all the flow'rs like Botticelli's flow'rs
Small, brilliant, close to earth, and youngly gay.

The Pasque-flow'r which ignores
A date the moon ordained, but takes its rule
From sun and rain, as both by chance occur;
Yet some years by a nice coincidence
Opens upon our very Easter-day
(When the sun dances or is said to dance,)
Lavender petals sheathed in silver floss
Soft as the suffle of a kitten's fur;

SPRING

That pulsatilla, 'shaken by the wind',
That fragile native of the chalky Downs;

Innumerable, the small flow'rs that stitch
Their needlework on canvas of the ground.
In the low foreground of their tapestry
They startle and exceedingly enrich.
There's a profusion hardly to be counted
When flow'r from bulb appears with each new
Spring,

Like to a spring of water newly founted,
Breaking the earth, and each an Easterling.

Bubbles of colour striking through the bleak
Dun soil, surprising, in a week,
As the low desert-flowers after rain
Leap into being where they were not seen
Few hours before, and soon are gone again.
So in our English garden comes the Greek
Blue wind-flow'r, cousin of the meek
Bashful anemone of English woods,
As thick as shingle strewn on Chesil Beach;
So comes the Lady Tulip, with her streak
Of pink that ribs her white; and through the green
Of young fine grass, the Glory of the Snow,
So blue, a smear of fallen sky; come each
In quick succession as they grow and blow
In liberal April, host to little guests:

The azure scilla, and the indigo
Grape-hyacinth in cluster like the breasts
Of the Ephesian mother of the earth,

THE GARDEN

Fecund Diana, and from seed self-sown
Running between the cracks of paving-stone
In rivulets of blue will wind and flow.
So lavish all, so piercing, and so bright
That all the words of all the tongues of men are worth
Not one quick instant's sight.

Yet, sealed upon the wax of memory,
Certain imprints, as in a peepshow's frame,
Brilliant and artificial, catch the light
To burn forever with a coloured flame
Always within the mind, chameleon,
Flaring the saddened corners and the doom.
The place, the hour, the flow'r, may have no name;
Is it Mycenae or the Lebanon?
Mycenae where the wild-flow'r rugs are spread
For the wild bees that hive in Agamemnon's tomb
Though Helen's false and Menelaus dead?
Is it the Lebanon that looks across
To Palestine and throws the cedar shade
To touch the greater shadow of the Cross
Though Christ be slain and Mary still a Maid?
It matters not, it matters not a shred
Whence beauty comes, if beauty only be
Held in the heart with love her constant twin,
Great myths that answer many a mystery.

The Syrian ranges and the Grecian mound. . . .
Or simpler painting of our English ground
As varied as the cloak of harlequin.
See, down the nut-plat, washing in a tide
That laves each inch of soil, the manifold
Wealth of the coloured primrose, thick and wide,

SPRING

Butter-and-eggs, with stripes of tiger-skin,
And saffron lakes, all shot with sun, and pied,
And clumps of polyanthus laced with gold.
The leopard's camouflage, the lion's pride,
Were not more freckled, tawny, than this mob
Matted in clusters, lowly, and so dense
They hide the earth beneath their opulence;
And down the colonnades of Kentish cob
Two little statues, one at either end,
Wistfully watch each other through the years,
Parted for ever, that can only send
Messages from their eyes too hard for tears;
Eros and Aphrodite, in defeat,
The prince of love, the queen of loveliness,
Never to touch and never to caress
Since from their pedestals they cannot move to meet.

Weave the poor poet all his ablest words
Into a poacher's snare, a springle set,
Making a mesh of pretty nouns his string
With knots of adjective and epithet,
Simple, felicitous, or richly grand,
—The finch of beauty struggles through the net
And bearing off her gold upon the wing
Is gone, uncaught, into a different air,
He knows not where,
Only that she is not within his hand.

Such days, such days so wealthy and so warm
As tempt the very busy bees to swarm,
Make the articulate poet silent; live
Instead of speaking; leave his desk and leave
His books, his foolscap, and the blue-black ink

THE GARDEN

Drying upon his pen as the sun falls
Hot on his table, beating on the walls.

How blessedè to exist and not to think !

He becomes one with Nature, sensitive
Only to that which happens, as the bee;
He is both permanent and fugitive;
He is the mole, the weasel, or the hawk;
He is the seed, the first leaf, and the stalk;
He grows, he breathes, he lives, and he is free,
Child of the sun and of the stroking air
Warming as he emerges from his door
As though he pushed aside
The leatherne curtain of cathedral porch
In Italy, and came outside
Followed by incense, to the pavement's scorch,
And shrank from glare of marble to the shade
Rounded in caverns of the curved arcade.

But in this dear delusion of a South
Which never was and never can be ours,
Drowsy, voluptuous, and rich in sloth,
We northerners must turn towards our flowers.
They are our colour; brave, they are our flags;
A living substitute for marble swags;
They flutter as the dressing of a ship,
Long pennants that in breezes blow and dip,
Gay as the washing of Venetian rags,
Cracking in colour as the lash of whip
Fine in the air, or as a feathered phrase,
An arrow shot of poetry or prose,
And each a note within a hymn of praise.

SPRING

April's the busy month, the month that grows
Faster than hand can follow at its task;
No time to relish and no time to bask,
(Though when indeed is that the gardener's lot,
However large, however small his plot?)
April's the month for pruning of the rose,
April's the month when the good gardener sows
More annuals for summer, cheap and quick,
Yet always sows too thick
From penny packets scattered on a patch
With here a batch of poppy, there a batch
Of the low candytuft or scabious tall
That country children call
Pincushions, with their gift
Of accurate observance and their swift
Naming more vivid than the botanist.
So the good gardener will sow his drift
Of larkspur and forget-me-not
To fill blank space, or recklessly to pick;
And gay nasturtium writhing up a fence
Splotching with mock of sunlight sunless days
When latening summer brings the usual mist.

He is a millionaire for a few pence.
Squandering Nature in her gift exceeds
Even her own demands.
Consider not the lily, but her seeds
In membrane tissue packed within the pod
With skill that fools the skill of human hands;
The poppy with her cracking pepper-pot
That spills in ripened moment split asunder;
The foxglove with her shower fine as snuff.

THE GARDEN

Consider these with thankfulness and wonder,
Nor ever ask why that same God
If it was He who made the flow'rs, made weeds:

The thistle and the groundsel with their fluff;
The little cresses that in waste explode
Mistaken bounty at the slightest touch;
The couch-grass throwing roots at every node,
With wicked nick-names like its wicked self,
Twitch, quitch, quack, scutch;
The gothic teazle, tall as hollyhock,
Heraldic as a halberd and as tough;
The romping bindweed and the rooting dock;
The sheeny celandine that Wordsworth praised,
(He was no gardener, his eyes were raised;)
The dandelion, cheerful children's clock
Making a joke of minutes and of hours,
Ironical to us who wryly watch;
Oh why, we ask, reversing good intentions,
Was Nature so ingenious in inventions,
And why did He who must make weeds, make flowers?

Let us forget the sorrows: they are there
Always, but Spring too seldom there;
Once in a life-time only; oh seize hold!
Sweet in the telling once, but not re-told.
In Nature's cycle blessèd once a year,
Not long enough to savour, but more dear
For all the anguish of its brevity.

Then in the poignant moment made aware
We are all things, the flower and the tree,

SPRING

Detail of petal, and the general burst
Greening the valley and th' horizonhurst;
The bud still folded and the bud fulfilled;
We are the distant landscape and the near.
We are the drought, we are the dew distilled;
The saturated land, the land athirst;
We are the day, the night, the light, the dark;
The water-drop, the stream; the meadow and the lark.

We are the picture, and the hand that paints;
The trodden pathway, and the foot that trod;
We are the humble echo of great saints
Who knew that God was all, and all was God.

Look round for truth when truth is near at hand,
So simple now it seems but life and love,
—Perhaps the general answer to a scheme
So strangely ciphered that in our extreme
Perplexity we stand
Most piteously duped by foolish feints.

Small is our vision, rare the searchlight beam;
Few moments given but in truth supreme.
Transcendent moments, when the simpler theme
Is suddenly perceived
And by our intricate uncertainty
We are no more deceived.

Resurgent May, softness with energy,
Warmth after cold, reunion after loss.
It is a columbarium full of doves,
A susurration of the living leaves.

SPRING

(Friable fistfuls of the soil are warm
To naked hand) and a kind discipline
Shall later check the young impetuous growth,
Stopping the very centre of their impulse,
Incomprehensibly, with cruel-kind
Slice of the knife aslant through sappy shoot,
And from that wound shall sturdier bushes spring.

And thus shall all biennials have your care,
Sown in their drills in May, that the full year
May pass before their last accomplishment;
The bell-flow'rs, and the Indian pinks; Sweet Rocket,
Scabious and hollyhock and Honesty.

But also think on more immediate months
And bring those annuals that fear the frost,
Loving the sun, more splendid for their briefness,
Out from their boxes sheltered under glass:
Mexican zinnias and the Texan phlox,
African marigolds, all bright exotics;
And sow when danger of the frost is past
Generous sprinklings of night-scented stock,
Dingy and insignificant and plain,
But speaking with a quiet voice at dusk.

These for the Summer; and with heedful eye
Quick as a hatching bird, the gardener roves
Precautionary, nipping mischief's bud.
For mischief buds at every joint and node,
Plentiful as the burgeon of the leaves:
Fungus and mildew, blight and spot and rust,
Canker and mould, a sallow sickly list;

THE GARDEN

The caterpillar that with hump and heave
Measures the little inches of his way;
And, pullulating more than Tartar hordes,
Despoiling as they travel, procreation
Calamitous in ravage, multitude
Unnumbered, come the insect enemies,
Tiny in sevralty, in union dire,
Clustered as dense as pile in plush—the aphis
Greening the hopeful shoot, the evil ant
Armoured like daimios, in horrid swarm
Blackening twigs, or hidden down their hole
Mining amongst the roots till flagging heads
Of plants betray their presence.

Gardener,
Where is your armistice? You hope for none.
It will not be, until yourself breed maggots.

Moles from the meadow will invade your plot;
Pink palm, strong snout, and velvet energy
Tunnel a system worthy of a sapper;
Heave monticules while you lie snug-a-bed,
And heave again, fresh chocolate, moist mould,
In mounds that show their diligent direction,
Busy while you but break your nightly fast,
Visible evidence of secret work,
And overground the nimble hopping rabbit
Soft as a baby's toy, finds out the new
Cosseted little plants with tender hand
Set out in innocence to do their duty.
Poor gardener! poor stubborn simpleton,
Others must eat, though you be bent on beauty.

SPRING

Yet you have allies in this freakish scheme
Of nature's contradictions. The good bee,
Unconscious agent; and the funny hedgehog;
The toad you nearly step on, blebbed and squat;
The glow-worm, little torch that bores its light
Into the shelly cavern of the snail;
The lady-bird, the Bishop Barnaby,
So neat in oval spotted carapace,
A joke to children, but to aphides
A solemn foe. . . . Oh curious little world,
Nether, yet paralleled against our own.

And more demands exact the gardener's care.
Those reckless buds, those ill-advisèd shoots!
"A tie so soon prevents their doom," they say,
So stake before the havoc of the gale,
The rough South-west that wears a cloak of rain,
But whether bruzzy hazel-tops you choose
Or pointed sticks from handy spinney cut,
Or bought bamboo,—set early into place
That growing plants may hide the artifice
And of your cunning cover up the trace.

Then for a moment may you pause, an hour
To let the snake of satisfaction creep,
Wriggling round corners, slithering down paths,
Rustling through grass, and, like that other serpent
Whispering in that other garden, tempt
To snug complacency, that foe to wisdom.
"Here you succeeded; this you plotted well;
Here did you turn the stream of Nature's will,
Damming the wilderness of her invasion;

THE GARDEN

Here did you triumph, here did you compel;
Here took advantage of a happy hazard;
Here, like a poet, made your colours rhyme;
Here, like a painter, made your pattern plain.
Rest now; enjoy; sit back; the years slip on
With many a little death before the last
Orgulous swordsman like a matador
Thrusts, and has done. The many little deaths,
Death of the ear, the half-death of the eye,
The muscle limping where it ran, the loss
Of strength that gradual as a dropping wind
Becalms the still-spread sails. Worst wane of all,
A lessening most hardly to be borne,
The pricking banderillas of the years
Bleed from your flanks in loss of that most precious
Zest of endeavour and anticipation,
Jewels of youth, those undivided twins
That live and die by one another's breath
And have no separate being.”

Dangerous counsel ever caught the ear,
Yet for that pleasing moment, not unduly
Prolonged, consider now the fruits of labour:
The tulips, that have pushed a pointed tusk
In steady inches, suddenly resolve
Upon their gesture. Earliest the royal
Princes of Orange and of Austria,
Their courtier the little Duc van Thol,
And, since the State must travel with the Church,
In plum-shot crimson, Couleur Cardinal.

SPRING

But grander than these dwarfs diminutive,
Comes the tall Darwin with the waxing May.
Can stem so slender bear such sovereign head
Nor stoop with weight of beauty? See, her pride
Equals her beauty; never grew so straight
A spire of faith, nor flew so bright a flag
Lacquered by brush-stroke of the painting sun.
And in the darkest corner of a room
One sheaf of tulips splashes; it illumes,
Challenge to mournfulness, so clean, so kempt,
As in the garden, brilliant regiment,
Their stretch illumes the distance.

In their range

From the white chastity of Avalanche
They pass through yellow of the buttercup
To cherry and the deepening red of blood
Violently based on dark electric blue;
All sheen, all burnish, orient as the pearl;
Lavender fringed with silver; royal purple
Growing more sonorous in glossy black
Of Faust and Sultan and La Tulipe Noire.
Ah, there were floods of tulips once in Holland;
There were old loving men with expert fingers,
Leading the better life of courtesy.

And if to vary the severity
Of single colour in a single flower
Your thoughts incline, set separate a patch
Of broken sports, by purist not esteemed
But loved by painters for the incidence
Of wayward streak and hint of porcelain.

THE GARDEN

The Rembrandt tulip, leather-brown and white
So finely feathered, brush of sable's hair
Never laid more exact, nor monkish clerk
Dusted his gold-leaf with more spare a hand;
Or the Bizarre in broken rose-and-white,
A china cup, a polished cup up-held
(Too maidenly; I cannot like so well;)
Or else the Parrot, better called the Dragon,
Ah, that's a pranking feat of fantasy,
Swirling as crazy plumes of the macaw,
Green flounced with pink, and fringed, and topple-
heavy,
A tipsy flower, lurching with the fun
Of its vagary. Has it strayed and fallen
Out of the prodigal urn, the Dutchman's canvas
Crammed to absurdity? or truly grown
From a brown bulb in brown and sober soil?

So cosmopolitan, these English tulips,
To cottager as native as himself!
Aliens, that Shakespeare neither saw nor sang.
Alien Asiatics, that have blown
Between the boulders of a Persian hill
Long centuries before they reached the dykes
To charm van Huysum and the curious Brueghel,
And Rachel Ruysch, so nice so leisurely
That seven years were given to two pictures.

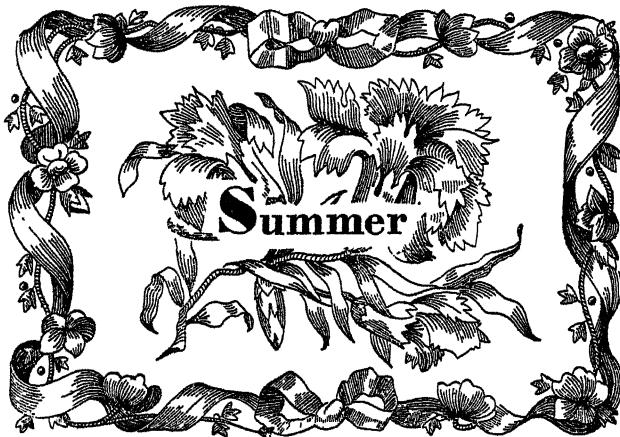
Tulip, *dulband*, a turban; rare
Persian that wanders in our English tongue.

SPRING

*How fair the flowers unaware
That do not know what beauty is!
Fair, without knowing they are fair,
With poets and gazelles they share
Another world than this.*

*They can but die, and not betray
As friends or love betray the heart.
They can but live their pretty day
And do no worse than simply play
Their brief sufficient part.*

*They cannot break the heart, as friend
Or love may split our trust for ever.
We never asked them to pretend:
Death is a clean sufficient end
For flower, friend, or lover.*



Sweet June. Is she of Summer or of Spring,
Of adolescence or of middle-age?
A girl first marvelling at touch of lovers
Or else a woman growing ripely sage?
Between the two she delicately hovers,
Neither too rakish nor, as yet, mature.
She's not a matron yet, not fully sure;
Neither too sober nor elaborate;
Not come to her fat state.
She has the leap of youth, she has the wild
Surprising outburst of an earnest child.
Sweet June, dear month, while yet delay
Wistful reminders of a dearer May;
June, poised between, and not yet satiate.

What pleasant sounds: the scythe in the wet grass
Where ground's too rough for the machine to pass,
(Grass should be wet for a close cut, the blade
Hissing like geese as swathe by swathe is laid;)
The pigeons on the roof, the hives aswarm;
June is the month of sounds. They melt and merge
Softer than shallow waves in pebbled surge
Forward and backward in a summer cove;
The very music of the month is warm,
The very music sings the song of love.

Such murmurous concert all our sense confounds.
The breath within the trees
Is it of doves or bees,
Or our own ripened heart
That must take part

THE GARDEN

Adding its cadence to the symphonies
Of June, that month of sounds?

That month of sounds, that month of scents,
That sensuous month when every sense
Ripens, and yet is young;
Th' external world, by which we judge
And sterner rules of reason grudge;
That dear misleading framework of our faith,
Truth in untruth, that picture slung
From such precarious nail; that nectarous breath
Of music, when the senses grow confused
And each might be the other; when, bemused,
We stray through thickets of the honeyed air.
But, Wanderer, then beware
Of beanfields amorous to strolling lovers,
Too dangerous (they say) to dally there
Along the hedgerow by the serried coverts
Where murmuring cushats hint that love is fair.
No sweeter load was ever laid at eve
Across the shoulders of the country's sweep
Mantled in June that, drowsing, seem asleep
But stir to greet the dream that all believe.

June of the iris and the rose.
The rose not English as we fondly think.
Anacreon and Bion sang the rose;
And Rhodes the isle whose very name means rose
Struck roses on her coins;
Pliny made lists and Roman libertines
Made wreaths to wear among the flutes and wines;

SUMMER

The young Crusaders found the Syrian rose
Springing from Saracenic quoins,
And China opened her shut gate
To let her roses through, and Persian shrines
Of poetry and painting gave the rose.

The air of June is velvet with her scent,
The realm of June is splendid with her state.
Asia and Europe to our island lent
These parents of our rose,
Yet Albion took her name from her white rose
Not from her cliffs, some say. So let it be.
We know the dog-rose, flinging free
Whip-lashes in the hedgerow, starred with pale
Shell blossom as a Canterbury Tale,
The candid English genius, fresh and pink
As Chaucer made us think,
Singing of adolescent meads in May.
That's not the rose in her true character;
She's a voluptuary; think of her
Wine-dark and heavy-scented of the South,
Stuck in a cap or dangled from a mouth
As soft as her own petals. That's the rose!
No sentimentalist, no maiden sweet,
Appealing, half-forlorn,
But deep and old and cunning in deceit,
Offering promises too near the thorn.
She is an expert and experienced woman
Wearing her many faces
Pleasing to different men in different places;
She plays the madrigal when moist with dew
To charm the English in their artless few,

THE GARDEN

But at her wiser older broad remove
Remains an Asiatic and a Roman,
Accomplice of the centuries and love.

Dangerous beauty we have sometimes seen,
Dangerous moments we have sometimes had.
Thus I saw floating in a sunken pool
A pavement of red roses in Baghdad.

A floating floor of dark beheaded blood
Between blue tiles that feigned to look so cool,
And that was beauty, sunk in liquid floor
Of roses and of water red as war,
But other visions took me on their flood
To other blood-red points where I had been:

St. Mark's in Venice on an Easter-day
Deep as the petals of Arabian rose,
When a great Cardinal in robes arose
Tremendous in the pulpit, and began
“Così diceva lo scrittore pagan” . . .
Virgil a living presence in the church;
Lambent mosaics, tarnished in their gold,
And all things heavy with their age, so old
They seemed as distant as my own lost search.

Those blood-red roses floating in the pool,
That blood-red lamp above the altar slung,
Were they identical, or I a fool?
God's lamp His own red rose, where censers swung?

SUMMER

Heavy July. Too rampant and too lush;
High Summer, dull, fulfilled, and satiate,
Nothing to fear, and little to await.
The very birds are hush.
Dark over-burdened woods: too black, their green.
No leaping promise, no surprise, no keen
Difficult fight against a young, a lean
Sharp air and frozen soil; no contest bright
Of fragile courage winning in despite.
Easy July, when all too warmly blows
The surfeit of the rose
Risking no harm;
And those aggressive indestructible
Bores, the herbaceous plants, that gladly take
Whatever's given and make no demand
Beyond the careless favour of a stake;
Humble appeal, not arrogant command,
Like some tough spinster, doughty, duteous,
All virtue and no charm.

I have no love for such fulfilment, none.
Too sweet, the English rain; too soft, the sun.
Too rank, midsummer in our gently moist
Island that never riots to extremes.
Moderate beauty, yet insidious,
The veils that magicked Shakespeare into dreams;
England, as douce as any woman's muff.

Where is the violence, the shrilly-voiced
Cicada of the arid plain?
Where the intransigence of Afric Spain?

THE GARDEN

Where are the stones, the fireflies, and the rough
Danger of mountain road?
Skeletons like the ribs of ships
Where beasts have fallen, broken by their load?
Even the aloe, used as cruel goad?
Sunlight on columns, lizards on the rocks?
There is another landscape, and my blood
Nostalgic stirs; I think upon the flocks
Raggedly seeking pasture in the scrub,
But must content myself with hollyhocks
And moisture-loving phlox
And the obliging shrub
Here in my lovely island, tender, safe,
While yet I chafe
For sunburnt wastes the colour of the fox.

Too tame, too smug, I cry;
There's no adventure in security;
Yet still my little garden craft I ply,
Mulch, hoe, and water when the ground is dry;
Cut seeding heads; thin out the stoning fruit;
Cut out th' unwanted, tie the wanted, shoot;
Weed paths that with one summer shower of rain
For all my labour are as green again.
And so strive on, for there is no repose
Even though Summer reddens with the rose.
Slug, snail, and aphis force a busy day,
With traps of orange-peel and lettuce-leaves to lay,
And buckets of insecticide to spray.
Black Spot, Red Rust, Red Spider, all the scale
Of enemy controlled by frothy pail,
Soft-soap and quassia chips, a murderous bath,

SUMMER

And in the evening note the hob-nail trail
Of slime, and crush the snail
Brittle as biscuit on the garden path.

(Here will the mottled thrush your helpmate be
With tap tap tap in secret carpentry
As one who hammers on a distant nail,
Heard, but too rarely seen.)

Now will the water-lilies stain the lake
With cups of yellow, chalices of cream,
Set in their saucer leaves of olive-green
On greener water, motionless, opaque,
—This haunt of ducks, of grebes, and poacher herns.
Now is the stillness deeper than a dream;
Small sounds, small movements shake
This quietude, that deeper then returns
After the slipping of the water-snake,
The jump of trout, the sudden cry of coot,
The elegiac hoot
Of owls within the bordering wood, that take
The twilight for their own.
This is their hour, and mine; we are alone;
I drift; I would that I might never wake.

Wake to a world where all important seem
Immediate actions in our little scheme,
Trifles of urgency, our warp and weft.
There is another world that doubles this poor world,
Where intimations like a source, a stream
Sprung from a rock by bolt of vision cleft
 Crowd on the spirit in an hour too brief
But in its stab, extreme.

THE GARDEN

Mine be those hours, their value, and their theft.
Are they the thief, or is the world the thief?
Let others say. I know but what I know,
And when I know, I have no need to ask.

And as with steps obedient and slow
Homeward I turn, and to the tool-shed go,
With dusk preparing to resume my task,
Take out the shining spade, the trug, the hoe,
Then once more must I stand amazed, for lo
The heavens change, as storm without a sound
Comes from the south, empurpling all the sky
Save where a province of rich gold doth lie
Above the tree-tops, strikes the distant vane,
And sweeps the stubble in a light profound
Such as I never saw, nor hope to see again.

And, fortune piled on fortune, comes a flight
Of snow-white pigeons crossing that dark cloud,
Luminous convoy slow against the wrack;
And as to frame their passage stands a proud
A double rainbow, perfect in its bright
Half-circle touching Heaven, and the ground.

Such things are given; never taken back.

Strange were those summers; summers filled with war.
I think the flowers were the lovelier
For danger. Then we lived the *pundonor*,
Moment of truth and honour, when the bull
Charges and danger is extreme, but skill

SUMMER

And daring over-leap the fallible will
And bring the massive beast to noble kill.
Moments as sharp as sword-points then we lived
Citing our death along the levelled blade;
Then in our petty selves were shaken, sieved,
Withouten leisure left to be afraid.

It was a strange, a fierce, unusual time.
Death's certain threat, that most men think remote,
Not for today, but for another day,
For some tomorrow surely far away,
Unreal as an ancient anecdote,
Came near, and did not smite, but sometimes smote.

We lived exalted to a different clime;
Not in safe seats behind the palisade
Watching while others risk the scarlet sweep
And make the pass of death before the Thing
Cited at bay to take the estocade
And spout the lung-blood dark upon the sand,
Sinking at last in slow and sculptural heap
At foot of the young dazzling matador
Armed only with his sword and wrist and hand,—
Not as spectators in those days of war
But in the stained ring.

Strange little tragedies would strike the land;
We sadly smiled, when wrath and strength were spent
Wasted upon the innocent.
Upon the young green wheat that grew for bread;
Upon the gardens where with pretty head
The flowers made their usual summer play;

THE GARDEN

Upon the lane, and gaped it to a rent
So that the hay-cart could not pass that way.
So disproportionate, so violent,
So great a force a little thing to slay.
—Those craters in the simple fields of Kent!

*It took a ton of iron to kill this lark,
This weightless freeman of the day.
All in its fate was irony. It lay
Tiny among monstrosities of clay,
Small solitary victim of the dark.*

*None other shared its fate, not the soft herd
Heavily ruminant, full-fed;
Not man or woman in their cottage bed;
Only this small, still-perfect thing lay dead.
I weighed it in my hand. How light, a bird!*

*Imponderable puff, it should have died
Singing as it had lived; been found
By death between the heaven and the ground;
Not suffered this eclipse without the sound
Of song by last gross irony denied.*

Coppices I have seen, so rudely scarred,
With all their leaves in small confetti strown;
The hazels blasted and the chestnut charred;
Yet by the Autumn, leaves of Spring had grown.
How temporary, War, with all its grief!
Permanence only lay in sap and seed.
They knew that life was all their little need,
And life was still in the untimely leaf.

SUMMER

This was our miniature, our minor share
In Europe's misery and desolation;
Not in our habit; war had never crossed
Our arrogant frontier; others met the cost,
But not our own, our moated isle, our nation.
England was sea-borne, Venus in her shell,
Lovely to her own self, and safe beyond compare;
We had heard echoes of an ernful knell
Sounding across our seas. We were not there.
We were at home, although our sons might go
As young men go, but we at home in slow
Resentment at an insult found at length
That half the sinews of our strength
Were cut by knives that slashed them from the air;
Yet, angry and astonished as we were
We kept our faith and even at moments said

*"This war will be over soon."
Yes, in September or perhaps November,
With some full moon or gibbous moon,
A harvest moon or else a hunter's moon
It will be over.*

*Not for the broken innocent villages,
Not for the broken innocent hearts:
For them it will not be over,
The memorable dread,
The lost home, the lost son, and the lost lover.*

*Under the rising sun, the waxing moon,
This war will be over soon,
But only for the dead.*

THE GARDEN

Strange were those summer nights, those nights of war.
The sky was all too busy and too full;
Beauty and terror both too bountiful.
We knew not which was which, of sound or sight;
Which held the richer store.
For sound the invisible war-planes overhead
Lost in the star-flecked velvet of the night,
And distant guns that sped
Fountains of fireworks such as children love,
Quick in ascent and languid in descent,
But poised for one pure moment at the peak;
And tracer bullets in a level streak
Cutting below the stars.

Then cried that most
Sinister plaint, prophetic sad lament,
Near, and then distant, as the call
Took up in rise and fall,
Ellinge as household ghost;
As beacons once strung out along the Downs,
Took up from villages and little towns
To darkened hamlets in the Weald of Kent
Not safe within the muffle of their oaks;
And from the English coast
Came guns that bruised the door,
Twitched at the windows, quavered in the floor;
And nearer still, and near,
In their great concert came, in thunder-strokes,
And travelled on to London with their roar
Dying away, for other men to hear.

Strange things we did, that none had done before.
. Sinister fears beset th' unseasoned mind;

SUMMER

Incalculable science, dubious friend,
More dubious still when turned to evil end;
We saw ourselves in horror choking, blind,
And mad precautions—were they mad or sane?—
Outraged our valid life in a profane
Lunatic twist where guardian science fought
With murderous science, barely to defend
Life which was all, though grace of life was nought.

Strange things indeed, that none had thought to do!
Dug trenches in the orchard when the fruit
Hung for September's picking; hung, and fell
Into the gashes open at the root.
We thrust our children in that clammy cell;
Like beasts we went to earth, for their small sake;
The vixen's litter, hidden in the brake,
Slept softer than the infant sons of men.
And we created darkness. Sons of light
By God's intention, over sea and land
In one wide gesture of erasing hand
We swept that symbol from our natural night.
No window in the sleeping village street,
No window in the cottages discrete;
Hidden, and like a child afraid
Shrinking beneath the bed-clothes that persuade
Into a sense of safety, then
We cowered in our darkness, yet we made
Different light, and watched it from the shades.

So tall and yet so silent as they stride,
Slow scissors walking up and down the black;
Soundless collision of their closing blades
That cut a star in half, and leave no track.

THE GARDEN

Sound should accompany such giant glide,
Expected sound, to match so grave a scale,
But like all lofty natives of the night
They're mute, it is their very quality.

Only the little native of low glades,
The frog, the owl, the thicket nightingale,
With tiny voice lift sylvan serenades
To different splendour on a different height:
Planets that are, and were not, suddenly
In solitary presence, primrose nail,
Fixed in the wash of sea-green sky as pale;
The dozy moon, the meteor quick in flight,
Are taciturn in their mysterious pride.

So joined in ancient and processional rite
Comes, unforeseen, this new
Magnificence to take belated place, and slue
High pivots without sound.
Oh see! their coronet of beams that spear
Our darkness in inverted chandelier
Based on the ordinary ground;
Notice, the while they veer,
The earth we live on shows both small and round.
We had not known th' horizon thus in curve
Unless at sea. Like truth without a swerve
Stiff from their base they rear their pyramid.
And see, at meeting apex, how they hold
A wide-winged dove, a crucifix in gold.
Is it a dove, soft-feathered? or a plane
Tiny with murder? or a wooden Cross?
A dove, a plane, a Cross, amid
The meeting beams at their convergent vane?

SUMMER

Here is new beauty turned into our gain.

This dove, this cross, within the rays
Caught as a floating point across the ways
Of the old skies, their old their travelled floor.
Can beauty then be born of hideous war?
So frightful parent bear so fair a child?
Watching, I wonder; and a hope too wild
Crosses my spirit, to requite our loss.
Can some fine purity emerge from dross,
Washed free from gravel, sifted, ore to find?
If I could not believe so, I must die
And worse than die, give up my soul's belief,
Deep Death beyond the body or the mind,
Grief gone beyond all human thought of grief.

Strange, how these lights examine round our sky . . .

Strangest of all, we knew that it must pass;
We knew the curtained future somewhere held
(However dark the glass,)
That unbelieved-in day of fear expelled
When extraordinary death should cease
And only ordinary death remain,
And men throughout their little world regain
The trim that they call peace.

So in the gardener's more persistent war
Where man not always is the conqueror,
We plodded as we could, and fought
Permanent enemies, of weed and wing:
The strangling bindweed and the running strands
Of crowsfoot, and the suckers of the rose,
Inordinate thorns that mangle our poor hands;

THE GARDEN

All these must every rank Summer bring,
And August duly brought
Swarms of a summer enemy, of those
Small samurai in lacquered velvet dressed,
Innumerable in their vermin breed
As fierce and fiery as a spark of gleed,
Scavengers on a gormandising quest
To batten on the treasure of our crops
Of promised fruit, our gages, Golden Drops,
Our peaches downy as a youthful cheek,
Our nectarines, in adolescence sleek;
They came, destructive though we sought their nest,
Those fiends that rustic oracles call wopse.

There's not a rhyme to *wasp* in English tongue.
Poor wasp, unloved, unsung!
Only the homely proverb celebrates
These little dragons of the summer day
That each man hates.
'Wasps haunt the honey-pot,' they say,
Or 'Put your hand into a wasps' nest,' thus
Neatly condensing all report for us
By sharp experience into wisdom stung,
As is the proverb's way.

*Of many a man it might be said
No one loved him till he was dead,
But of a wasp not even then
As it is said of many men.*

Dug by nocturnal badger from his nest;
Branded, as though by his own stripes, a pest;

SUMMER

Every man's hand against him, every dog
Snapping mid-air with fine heraldic leap
Between a summer sleep and summer sleep
On drowsy, drenched, and lotus afternoon
When peaches ripen and the ring-doves croon.

So let me write the wasp his apologue
In blend of hatred, wonder, and of jest;
That moral fable never told
Of little Satan in his black and gold,
His coat of tigerskin;
Fastened, a close, a dreamy glutton lover
Drinking late fig and later nectarine.
Let me discover
Some evil beauty in his striped array,
Bad angel of the wingèd air-borne tribe,
And have the honour of his earliest scribe.

Evil he is; to him was evil given
If evil be within our judgment, when
We seek to sift the purposes of heaven.
Exquisite wasp! that our fine fruit devours,
His taste at least as elegant as ours.
And if he should not strike at meddling men
Why did his Maker arm him with a sting?

He's small, he's vicious, he's an easy prey;
With greater skill our ingenuity
Kills with one crack so intricate a thing;
So difficult to make, beyond our powers.
Man can make man, but there his cunning ends;

THE GARDEN

That necessary act he can dispatch
As Nature urges, launching out a batch
Of new descendants, rivals, precious friends,
But not an insect subtle on the wing.
Oh Man! now mark:
Could you send out one moth upon the dark,
One bat, one delicate bat, that senses wide
The threads of cotton on his passage tied,
One butterfly with wings ornate
As Byzantine mosaics, flutterling
That in your chimney has the wit to hide
All Winter through, until
With your first sick-room fire, when you are ill
And call for solace of the genial grate,
He with still slothful wings descends
From that dark, sooty gloom
Into the warmth of your close room
To flutter on your window-panes and twitch
The ears of sleepy cur
Happily stretched along your hearth, with bitch
Softly domestic, curved against his fur.
Could you make these? Oh no. But you can kill.

So let me grant the hated wasp his due,
He showed me beauty where I had not thought
Beauty to find. He drove me out with torch
To seek among pale leaves at darkest night
Pale grapes on sculptured porch,
Hanging from column and from architrave
In classical festoon,
Aquamarine, a cave
Of strangest green in that strange light,

SUMMER

And this was beauty. Thanks to him, that knave,
All thanks to him, I sought
The rosy rondure of the moonlit peach
So stilly heavy on her slender twig,
Too often out of reach
So left for him to whom I much forgave;
All thanks to him, I found the Ischian fig
Yellowing in September's yellow moon,
Or Turkey fig burst open to reveal
Mediterranean flesh of Homer's wine-dark sea.
Such nights could indignation much anneal;
I had not seen such fine, such lovely sights
On deeply private nights
But for his mischief in the end my weal.
Much did he take, but more gave back to me.

So stay your hand, your condemnation stay:
Even the wasp, like dog, must have his day,
And as I know that Shakespeare, country lad
Pocketing Venus and Adonis, might
Pocket a Warwick lane, with woodbine, snail,
And turn it all towards a Roman tale
Or else a Belmont and Venetian night,
So do I think that country lad
So English-sane, so universal-mad,
Had wasps in mind, when he of rascal thieves
Wrote, that go suck the subtle blood of the grape.
These were no alien or Athenian thieves;
They were the wasps on plums on Stratford walls.
He stung his fingers, stealing ripened fruit,
No mine or thine,
A schoolboy's loot;

THE GARDEN

He was a boy, and took his boyish shape
Of mind into his verse, as poets do,
Using small instances to make a line.

And let me end upon a note of hope
For persecuted wasp, so neat, so fine,
That in sarcastic verse I thus enshrine:
It was a wasp that in a glass of wine
Once killed a Pope.

So passes Summer, still without one brief
Respite from labour, simply to enjoy;
Never that empty moment of relief
When every task is done, no urgent ploy.
Martha not Mary bustles to her chores
Living, not saying, her creative prayers.

Save when some cause must interrupt the fret
And force the contemplative blessed spell
When Martha's garden turns to Mary's cell,
And Martha must her diligence forget.
No cell enclosed, but open to the broad
Vision that knows no wall of time or stone,
When scattered notes resolve into a chord;
The cell where visionary eyes may dwell
On images their own, yet not their own;
Alone, yet less than in companionship alone.

SUMMER

*Green vine-shade; sweet airs breathe; leaves lift;
Tendrils in tenderest of shadows drift.
Dog, on the dappled ground your dappled body lay.
Black sun, black humble-bees, black grapes;
Slim carven columns wreathed in vine;
My little world of gently stirring shapes;
Summer, the corn's last standing day.*

*I'm ill; my body is not mine.
My mind is more than mine, and lifts astray
Up with the leaves, as light as they.
No Thought, but Being; rarest idleness.
Princes, for all I care, may ride away.
I suffer nothing but the air's caress.*

*Yet in this flute-note shadowed melody
A new companion shares my loneliness:
Some stranger in myself, alone with me.*

For our life is terribly private in the end,
In the last resort;
And if our self's a stranger, what's a friend?
A pretty children's game of let's pretend!
We can share nor the puzzle nor the grief,
Neither the physical nor mental pain,
The insecurity, the fears insane . . .
How fortunate, that life should be so brief!

*Yet I arise again, and very loth
Leave that sweet spell of sloth.
Perhaps the better part, to dream and gaze
And some Creator praise
For bounty that we nothing did to earn,*

THE GARDEN

*And rest content
With green beneath the leaves' translucent tent
In woods wherein the fern
Uncurls her crozier where the moss is wet
And the wild violet
Smokes blue along the pack-way in a haze.*

*All strangely come, with nothing due to man.
Not his, that perfect plan.
He measures out the stars he could not make,
He names the sliding snake,
But walks, a witling in the world he owns.
For all his skill
He fashioned not the Lenten daffodil,
Nor set between the stones
Gentians by running water in the peat,
Nor sent the fleet
Of water-lilies sailing on the lake.*

*His art is imitation, and with love
On nature to improve.
The necessary fool has learnt to see
A better model, free
From labour, lavish in conceit, a wealth
Without a fence,
Plenteous fancy, varied difference,
Where he may rob by stealth
Invention's plunder, since the woods more wise
Offer his eyes
A garden at the foot of every tree.*

SUMMER

Now shall the sharpened and well-oiled shears
Be lifted from their shelf and put to use
On the year's growth of hedges, too profuse.
Order and comeliness must be restored
(Nature the wanton lady, Man the Lord),
As through the weeks the trimmer perseveres,
Leaving with sigh all other jobs for this,
Seeing his borders flounder, seeing new
Weed that, neglected, sportively appears;
But still must drudge on urgent artifice
With aching arms and spine that will not bend
When evening comes, till hedges are abhorred
And stretch in nightmare miles, set end to end.

Whether the twiggy hornbeam or the beech,
The quick, the holly, or the lime to pleach,
Or little box, or gravity of yew
Cut into battlements to frame a view
Before the frost can harm the wounded tips,
Throughout the days he trims and clips and snips,
As must the guardian of the child correct
Distorted growth and tendencies to wrong,
Suppress the weakness, countenance the strong,
Shaping through craft and patience of the years
Into a structure seemly, firm, erect,
Batter and buttress, furious gales to scorn.
He is both gardener and architect
Working in detail on his walls and piers
Of green anatomy, his garden's frame,
Design his object, shapeliness his aim,
Yet, practical, will with big gloves protect
His hands against the blister and the thorn.

THE GARDEN

Plant not the vulgar privet, to your shame,
Nor laurel far less noble than its name,
Lost to reminder of the Pythian game;
Nor macrocarpa, cheap, and evergreen,
And fast in growth, until some searing day
Of Winter turns it dead and bracken-brown
With nothing left to do but cut it down,
That cypress wrongly called of Monterey.
How wrongly ! I have seen
At Monterey where sand is silver-clean
And the Pacific azure to Cathay
And nothing passes but a passing ship,
That different tree upon its moon-white strand,
Twisted and dark, alone with sea and sand.
Strange coast, strange tree upon its chosen strip
Of the available world, this edge of land.

Not only on those narrow miles apart
It grows, but travels in the stricken heart
Of those who learnt its beauty in a brief
Vision, and kept it as a constant fief.

Plant box for edging; do not heed the glum
Advice of those unthinking orthodox
Gardeners who condemn the tidy box
As haven for the slug, through winter numb.
Slugs will find shelter, box or nany box,
Therefore plant straightly, and with August come
Clip neatly (you may also clip in May
If time allow, a double yearly trim
To make your edging thicker and more prim,)

SUMMER

And in the scent of box on genial day
When sun is warm as seldom in this isle,
Smell something of the South, as clippings pile
Beneath your tread, like aromatic spray
Strewn down the paving of cathedral aisle
On pagan-Christian feast-day, for the feet
Of the devout to crush, who know not what they do
Save that they breathe an air both sharp and sweet.

Or as in some old hall, where dogs abound,
Sniffing for bones across the littered ground,
Herbs pungent mixed with wood-smoke and with peat,
The rosemary, the tansy, and the rue.

So for your garden choose the lavish best;
Impatience and a false economy
Never made value yet, so gravely plant
Even the slowest and the costliest
And wait for the reward the years will grant.
Consider those who, selfless, placidly
Thought for the future and themselves endured
Vistas of sticks, absurd, in formal line,
That should be leafy avenues, matured.
Le Nôtre saw a skeleton design,
Content if but the future were assured.

Aristocrat of hedges, noble yew!
Our English cypress, feudal, stately, dark,
Nurtured on blood of bullocks, patriarch,
Whether in venerable avenue
Or single on the road, a pilgrim's mark.
Ancestral yew! yet faint to fantasy,

THE GARDEN

Lending its dignity
To such caprice as takes the gardener's mind,
In topiary elaborate
Of Pliny's Tuscan villa, or the state
Of royal palace and of country-seat,
Tortured to such conceit
As chessmen, dragons, elephants resigned
To carry howdahs; obelisk most neat,
Pyramids mocking Egypt, cannon-balls
For ever static on their verdant walls;
Or crownèd queen upon an arm-chair throne;
No natural growth, but vaunted specimen,
Ingenious and laborious feat
Of many slavish gardeners of rich men
That thus through years the patient yew maltreat.

Only, an echo at the cottage-gate
In simple drollery diverts the hind.
He nothing knows of Pliny, nor what great
Topiary tradition lies behind.
He only knows that when his work is done
For others, and he turns towards his own,
He will indulge his serious sense of fun;
Will train a pheasant sitting on her eggs,
A homely kettle, with a proper spout;
The things he knows: a stool on three thin legs;
A pig, a silent pig, in dark dark green,
Such as in pigsty never yet was seen;
And as his children watch and prance and shout
“Father! make grow a ring within his snout,”
He grins, and ably twists some wire and twine
To turn his pig into a porcupine.

SUMMER

Soon will his pheasant fly from off her nest,
His kettle pour. . . . He jests. I also jest.

But yew, that prince, that poet of our trees
That to our humour docile condescends
And in fantastic shapes both twists and leans,
(As Shakespeare gave the groundlings comic scenes
Of clowns and knock-about,
And would not scorn to please
His simple countrymen, his lowly friends,
Yet carried them in magic and alarm
Into unearthly regions, to draw breath
So rarified, they wondered what was near,
What strange suggestion, what strange hand and arm
Reached out to touch them from the haunts of fear,
What cipher written in what shibboleth,
What depths of shadow, chasms of the soul,
Translated on to variegated scroll
Now wise, now mad, now colourless, now gay,
All life, and that beyond, which we call death,)
So does the yew, the architectural yew,
In sombre mood or freakish match our day.
By moonlight it but tells us what we knew,
That all is tenebrous, uncertain, lit
In fitful patches mingled with the gloom
More beautiful because indefinite:
The chamber of the day or of the tomb?
The moonlight falls deceptive: who can say?

Yet the strong daylight makes the yew a grove,
A very temple of retreat or love,
Suggestive shadows richly ambient.

SUMMER

With classic names, Thisbe, Penelope,
Whose nectarous load grows heavier with the dusk
And like a grape too sweetly muscadine.

So let invention riot. Dare
Th' unorthodox; be always bold; be prince;
This is your realm; let fancy flaunt and flare;
Fail if you must, outrageous heretic,
But gloriously fail: the dream, the brag,
No prudent prose, but lyric rhetoric.

So for your hedges plant the tossing quince,
Cydonia many-coloured as a flag,
In sentimental Apple-Bloom, full-blown,
Or Knaphill Scarlet, wrongly named, that rag
Coral not scarlet, flown
Startling against a sky as gray as stone;
Or, deep as a Venetian robe outspread
Against a cottage wall, the veteran Red.

Or plant in jewelled swagger, twin with use,
Myrobolans, prolific cherry-plum,
Topaz and ruby, where the bees may hum
In early blossom, and, with Summer come,
Children and wasps dispute the wealth of juice.
Level your hedge by pruning to the spur,
But here and there, at intervals designed,
Let a strong tree go up in loftier
Canopy hung with fruit, a spreading cry,
As from the tedious level of mankind
Once in a generation rise the high
Lanterns of the imaginative mind.

THE GARDEN

And since the garden's backbone is the Hedge
Shaping to seemly order, set it square,
Not in weak curves that half deny the pledge
Given to pattern in intent austere.
Gardens should be romantic, but severe.
Strike your strong lines, and take no further care
Of such extravagance as pours the rose
In wind-blown fountains down the broken walls,
In gouts of blood, in dripping flower-falls,
Or flings the jasmine where the walls enclose
Separate garths, a miniature surprise.
Marry excess to an adroit repose,
With no confusion of a plan so clear
It speaks its outline to the mind and eyes,
Instant, intelligible, and sincere,
As should be, seldom is, the life of man.

And set the axis of your garden plan
In generous vistas reaching to a bourn
Far off, yet visible, a certain term
Definite as ambition, and as firm;
Stopped by a statue or a little urn
Cut to contain the ashes of a stern
Roman (the ruin of his villa lies
Buried beneath the barley, near our coast.)

That small sarcophagus, that nameless shrine
Set in a square-cut niche of yew, alone,
So shadowy it breeds the curly fern,
Shall speak for the male Roman, dead but strong,
The salutary necessary ghost.

SUMMER

Let the nymph stand for beauty's token sign,
Slanting her head beneath her wreath of stone,
About to clash her cymbals, always mute;
With elbow crook'd and one suggestive hand
Ready to drop towards her loosened zone;
Glancing towards the Roman, wistfully,
As ever in a profitless pursuit
Beauty shall beckon to mortality.

And these shall be your symbols; let them stand
Looking at one another down the long
Grave path you planned as not your life you planned.

But if so rarely fortunate you be
That God runs water through your English home,
River or brook, or little pricking spring,
Remember how the fountains play in Rome.
Enforce the most from this most living thing.
The lark has not a finer, sweeter song
Than drips of water, orient as pearl,
In moon-laid ovals dropped upon a rock
Splashing through night and day, eternally,
Regular as the ticking of a clock
But with a loveliness no clock of time
Might ever tell, or quarters ever chime.

And if your river yet more wildly swirl
Set your quiescent nymph beside it; dip
Her foot within the water; let her look
Across the separation of the brook
Towards her soldier where the ferns unfold
In green that later turns to bracken-gold;

THE GARDEN

Even as on her nape the pearl and curl
Cluster against the bending of her head
So virginal, so tender, and so sweet
It seems a lover's kiss must falter there
Amongst the tendrils of her volute hair
In subtler kiss than kiss on parting lip;

Yet by their nature they may never meet
Since she is marble, and her soldier dead.

Water is living; water springs from earth,
Whether from mountains poured in melting stream
Or risen in the stones, a bubbling birth
Struck by some Moses from a sombre dream,
Some Pisgah vision, some divining-rod
That finds in rock the hidden hint of God.
Water is living; water tells its tale,
Its legendary music; coots and swans
Swim to the summons in their various plume,
Olive as water glossy in the gloom,
Blue-white as sumptuous as mountain snows
Sun-smitten where the sources first arose,
—The high land paramount, the low land paravail,—
And circle at that bidding, dark or pale,
Around the pool, explore the little creek,
And delicately drink with dipping beak
The silver water from the urn of bronze.



Autumn in felted slipper shuffles on,
Muted yet fiery,—Autumn's character.
Brown as a monk yet flaring as a whore,
And in the distance blue as Raphael's robe
Tender around the Virgin.

Blue the smoke

Drifting across brown woods; but in the garden
Maples are garish, and surprising leaves
Make sudden fires with sudden crests of flame
Where the sun hits them; in the deep-cut leaf
Of peony, like a mediaeval axe
Of rusty iron; fervour of azalea
Whose dying days repeat her June of flower;
In Sargent's cherry, upright as a torch
Till ravelled sideways by the wind to stream
Disorderly, and strew the mint of sparks
In coins of pointed metal, cooling down;
And that true child of Fall, whose morbid fruit
Ripens, with walnuts, only in November,
The Medlar lying brown across the thatch;
Rough elbows of rough branches, russet fruit
So blet it's worth no more than sleepy pear,
But in its motley pink and yellow leaf
A harlequin that some may overlook
Nor ever think to break and set within
A vase of bronze against a wall of oak,
With Red-hot Poker, Autumn's final torch.

The medlar and the quince's globe of gold.
How rich and fat those yellow fruits do hang!
They were light blossom once, a light-foot girl,
All cream and muslin once, now turned to age

THE GARDEN

Mellow with fine experience. The sun
Burnt in one season what the years must need
For a girl's ripening. He was the lover
In dilatory half-awakened Spring;
He was the husband of the fruitful Summer,
Father of pregnancy that brings those fruits
Ready to drop at the first touch of hand
Carefully lifting at the parting stalk,
Or at the first wild breath of wind, so soft
You think it harmless, till it blows the vanes
Crooked this way and that, a treacherous wind
Bringing the apples down before their date.

All's brown and red: the robin and the clods,
And umber half-light of the potting-shed,
The terra-cotta of the pots, the brown
Sacking with its peculiar autumn smell,
Musty in corners, where the cobweb panes
Filter the sun, to bronze the patient heaps
Of leaf-mould, loam, and tan of wholesome peat;
And sieves that orderly against the wall
Dangle from nail, with all the panoply
(Brightened by oily rag) of shining tools,
The gardener's armour, pewter as a lake,
And good brown wood in handles and in shafts;
Plump onion and thin bassen raffia
Slung from the rafters where the ladders prop.

And in the gloom, with his slow gesture, moves
The leatherne demigod of this domain,
Like an old minor god in corduroy
Setting and picking up the things he needs,
Deliberate as though all Time were his.

AUTUMN

Honour the gardener! that patient man
Who from his schooldays follows up his calling,
Starting so modestly, a little boy
Red-nosed, red-fingered, doing what he's told,
Not knowing what he does or why he does it,
Having no concept of the larger plan.
But gradually, (if the love be there,
Irrational as any passion, strong,)
Enlarging vision slowly turns the key
And swings the door wide open on the long
Vistas of true significance. No more
Is toil a vacant drudgery, when purport
Attends each small and conscientious task,
—As the stone-mason setting yard by yard
Each stone in place, exalting not his gaze
To measure growth of structure or assess
That slow accomplishment, but in the end
Tops the last finial and, stepping back
To wipe the grit for the last time from eyes,
Sees that he built a temple,—so the true
Born gardener toils with love that is not toil
In detailed time of minutes, hours, and days,
Months, years, a life of doing each thing well;
The Life-line in his hand not rubbed away
As you might think, by constant scrape and rasp,
But deepened rather, as the line of Fate,
By earth imbedded in his wrinkled palm;
A golden ring worn thin upon his finger,
A signet ring, no ring of human marriage,
On that brown hand, dry as a crust of bread,
A ring that in its circle belts him close
To earthly seasons, and in its slow thinning
Wears out its life with his.

THE GARDEN

That hand, that broke with tenderness and strength
Clumps of the primrose and the primula,
Watched by a loving woman who desired
Such tenderness and strength to hold her close,
And take her passionate giving, as he held
His broken plants and set them in the ground,
New children; but he had no thought of her.
She only stood and watched his capable hand
Brown with the earth and golden with the ring,
And knew her part was small in his lone heart.

So comes he at the last to that long Paradise
Where grateful Pharaoh hews a mountain tomb
For the good gardener, the faithful slave,
(Slave not of royalty, but his own piety,)
Painting the vaulted roof of that deep cave
With fresco of imperishable fruit
Such as no earthly gardener ever grew,
Pale peaches and pale grapes, so healthy-heavy
Yet slung from tendrils of a filament
Too weak to bear a locust's weight. He sleeps,
No pest, no canker troubling that deep sleep,
Under the pattern that he scarce divined.

Such gardeners we have known. We cannot cut
Sepulchres in the mountains, on a butt
Of stone within the Valley of the Kings
In the perennial sunshine of the Nile
To do them honour. Such extravagant things
Are not within the scope of our cheap style.
To do them honour we can only give
On paper, not papyrus, not on rock

AUTUMN

Graven, the simplest words in epitaph
To make their courage and their memory live.
So will I write for one fine gardener
Who died too young, caught up in folly's flock,
This epitaph of gratitude, in grief
That he, who so loved life, found life so brief.

*He had the love of plants, the eager eyes,
The tender fingers, and the neatest skill.
English, he told me how he longed to see
Our garden flowers on their native hill
Before he died. He thought that life was long . . .*

*Now he has seen them, as in flames he fell
Downwards towards the steep Illyrian cleft
And caught their colour lit by flames of Hell.*

*God grant, he never thought his fate was wrong;
God grant, he had a vision of the gift
Of his desire, by danger sanctified;
God grant, he saw in one last moment's rift
That carpet spread beneath him as he died.*

Move onward, Life; we cannot stop to grieve.
The seed demands the soil, that it may live;
This mystery of contact, strange, devout
In union, as the general scheme of love.
See, in our careful hoard of leaf-mould, sprout
Chestnuts from conkers, little pallid leaf
Of beech from mast, from acorn little oak,
Each in their germination hopefully
Intent on growing to a forest tree;

THE GARDEN

Close consequence that seed and soil provoke!
Each to his kind, majestic or minute,
Following unaware but resolute
The pre-ordainèd plan
That makes an oak, a daisy, or a man.

So at the potting-bench we play the part
Of gods, and at our humour give
Life's opportunity as we decree.
Flattering power! when our studied art
Dragoons unruly Nature to our hand.
Toss infant oaks aside, and through the sieve
Pass virgin loam and leaf-mould, mixed with sand,
Open and sharp and rich, where seedlings start
Astonished into life, and safely stand
The winter through; or in the open drill
Sow hardier seeds, that from the Winter's ill
Grow more robust and ready for the sweet
Lenience of the Spring when days expand;
As the poor orphan that the Fates maltreat
Toughens uncoddled in the frost, the sleet,
Expecting nothing else from world unkind
Where he who lives not, dies;
But at the first soft touch awakes to throw
Blossoms of thankfulness in wild surprise
Such different aspect of the world to find,
And in the kiss of sun forgets the snow.

So Autumn's not the end, not the last rung
Of any ladder in the yearly climb,
When that is deathly old which once was young,
Since time's no ladder but a constant wheel

AUTUMN

Like an old paddled mill that dips and churns
The mill-race, and upon the summit turns
Unceasingly to heel
Over, and scoop fresh water out of time.

Autumn's a preparation for renewal,
Yet not entirely shorn
Of tardy beauty, last and saddest jewel
Bedizening where it may not adorn.
Few of the autumn blooms are deeply dear,
Lacking the spirit volatile and chaste
That blows across the ground when pied appear
The midget sweets of Spring, and in their haste
The vaporous trees break blossom pale and clear,
—Carpet and canopy, together born.

Stalwarts of Autumn lack that quality;
Only the little frightened cyclamen
With leveret ears laid back look fresh and young,
Or those pure chalices that Kentish men
Call Naked Boys, but by a lovelier name
Others call Naked Ladies, slender, bare,
Dressed only in their amethystine flame,
The Meadow Saffron magically sprung
By dawn in morning orchards in the grass
Near paths where shepherds on their errand pass
But ender-night beheld no crocus-colour there.

These in the sodden season (unaware
That in their fragile temper they belong
Rightly to Spring and to the early song
Of birds that in September's April days

THE GARDEN

Bring music back to fill the empty air
And knot the fugue into the final phrase
Repetitive, and with a looping thong
Coil round our hearts prepared to weep
Their valedictory tears
Over the irrecoverable years,
Over lost youth, lost hope, and that fine leap
Vaulting all obstacle of doubts and fears,
Strong, confident, excited, and inspired
By youth's divine un wisdom, never tired
And never longing for the final sleep,)
These in their sudden springing and their youth
Restore the ecstasy that once we took for truth.

So in September when a day of rain
Holds up your outdoor work, make gain
Out of your seeming loss; devote
A morning to those bleaker days remote
Of January through to March as bleak
When flow'rs are few to find and cold to seek,
(The hellebore, bespattered with the mud;
The daring primrose meek
Hiding beside the little brook in flood
Come long before her time;
The winter aconite that gilds the rime
Between the spillikins of grass;
The jasmine sprays that in a fountain fall,
These with cold fingers picked and brought
Under the lamplight in a pool of small
Surprising colour, tabled in a glass,
Dearer because so difficultly sought,
Miniature triumphs rescued from the storm,

AUTUMN

—These shall be supplemented by your thought
Prophetic, while September yet is warm.

Pack the dark fibre in the potter's bowl;
Set bulbs of hyacinth and daffodil,
Jonquil and crocus, (bulbs both sound and whole,) Narcissus and the blue Siberian squill.

Set close, but not so tight
That flow'ring heads collide as months fulfil
Their purpose, and in generous sheaf expand
Obedient to th' arrangement of your hand.
Yours is the forethought, yours the sage control.

Keep the too eager bulbs from ardent light;
Store in a gloomy cupboard, not too chill;
Give grateful moisture to the roots unseen,
And wait until the nose of bleachedèd shoot
Pushes its inches up, in evidence
That many worms of root
Writhe whitely down to fill
The darkness of the compost, tangled, dense.
Then may you set your bowls on window sill
And smile to see the pallor turn to green.
Fat, pregnant, solid horns, that overnight
Swell into buds, and overnight again
Explode in colour, morning's sudden stain,
In long succession, nicely planned between
Epiphany and Easter, if so be
Easter falls early and the window-pane
Still shows the fine the crisp anatomy
Of fern-like frosted frond,
And nothing in the waiting soil beyond.

THE GARDEN

But in October, later, shall you stand
With paper sack of bulbs and plunge your hand
And careless fling your bulbs both large and small
To roll, to topple, settling sparse or thick,
Over the grass, and plant them where they fall,
(Legitimate device, a sanctioned trick.)
Thus in a drift as though by Nature planned
Snowdrops shall blow in spreading tide,
Little white horses breaking on the strand
At edge of orchard; and the orange-eyed
Narcissus of the poets in a wide
Lyrical river flowing as you pass
Meandering along the path of grass.

Their names are little poems in themselves:
Grand Soleil d'Or, great golden sun,
Earliest in its gift, with Winter Gold.
Their very names are Light, when days are dun.
Seagull, and Sunrise,—are they sailing-ships?
What Golden Spur pricked Fortune and Desire?
What Queen of Spain was loved by Sweet Adare?
What Emperor kissed Roxana on the lips?

Yet Autumn calls for courage, as the end
Of all things calls for courage,—love or life;
Seldom with clean-cut slicing of the knife,
But a slow petering, a dismal droop,
As browning asters tied into a group
No lovelier than a birch-broom, in a head
Soggy, and dank, and very nearly dead.

AUTUMN

Then in such days the flame of faith is low;
Spring is far off, and in the Winter dread
Most tepidly and cowardly we go.

*My mood is like a fire that will not heat;
There's touchwood, and a chequer-board of peat;
The sturdy logs laid ready, sere and dry;
The match-box, and the chimney swept and high;
There's all the setting for a roar of flame
But love and poetry are but a name,
And neither will my fuel burn, nor I.*

*Flame of my hearth, a grizzled heap of ash;
Flame of my heart, turned trumpery and trash.
Did I live once? did once my timber flare?
Did I dare all that now I do not dare?
Did once I kindle, leap, lick high, scorch, blaze,
In splendid arson of my reckless days?
I, smothered clinker, cold and un-aware?*

*Get hence, damp mood, as musty as the shroud,
Such sulky torpor suits no spirit proud;
Come, flame; come, tongue of courage; scorch me, sear,
I'll risk the burning to regain the clear
Fangs of returning life as sharp as fire.
Better, I swear, to be consumed entire
Than smoulder, knowing neither zest nor fear.*

Then, in a sudden spurt revived, I cry
As both my mood and litten fire burn high,

THE GARDEN

*Oh Days, be double! Hours, be forty-eight!
Oh Time, be rathe for once, instead of late!
Oh Sun, stand still! Oh Moon, neglect to rise!
Oh Daylight, dilly-dally in the skies!*

*Oh life too rich, oh years too fleet, too fleet,
Oh simple thought, that going youth is sweet!
Was never felt such truth-in-platitude
Till rapid rush of our incertitude.*

*Not the white hairs, but oh the end, the end!
The little that we know, the love, the friend,
The room, the garden path, the day's affairs,
The movements of the heart, the joys, despairs.*

*Oh bolting Time, rough pony of my days,
Halt by the hedgerow of my life to graze.
Halt but an hour; there's pulse as strong as mine,
There's herbage still, there's ramage, vetch, and bine.*

*Halt, and consider as you wildly go:
I am the only thing I truly know,
My extant life my only episode;
Your rattling course completes my only road,*

*The only chapter of my narrative.
My verb is still in the indicative.
Oh years gone by! oh years still going past
In wild crescendo, fast and ever fast
Like some mad back-cloth scenes that, worked
at speed,
Drawn backwards in their prospect still recede,
And I, oh God! not ready yet to live.*

AUTUMN

Now the dark yew, that sombre secret soul,
Bears fruit, more coral than our ugly blood;
Bright wax within the green, a tallow stud
Most exquisite in substance and in form,
Strewn by the birds and by the soft wild storm
In sprinkled carpet underneath the bays
Of taxine carpentry, these autumn days.

The breeze that autumn night was hot and south.
I met a frog that carried in his mouth
One of those berries, on unknown intent.
So brisk, so earnest, in his ranine hurry,
I stood aside to let him take his bent.
He had his right to's life as I to mine;
I had my right to my descriptive line,
He had his right to his more precious berry.
I stopped, he hopped, I watched him where he went.
He had no fear of me and could not doubt
What love I had for him, that blebbed and queer
Visitant from the woodland mere
Who, gaudy with his berry sticking out,
Met me beneath the cavern of the porch
As we were meant to meet,
—Miniature monster circled at my feet
Within the coin of my miraculous torch.

He lowly, and the architectural porch so tall,
But he, in *his* way, also a miracle.

Gone in the morning, but nocturnal yew
Bore evidence of writing in the night,
Somnambulistic poems, fine and light,
Glistering webs down the long avenue,

THE GARDEN

Hammocks of fancy, geometric maze,
A spell that never might a poet write.
These mushroom days, these moist and misty days
When the drenched grass looks heavy with the dew
And all the distance shrouded into shapes
Dimly divined, the ghost of what we knew,
Solid with apples hanging in the haze,
Red as a smaller sun, and nearer to our gaze;
And on the rosy walls the greening grapes
And pears already sleepy with their weight.
Brambles turn black, the little sloe turns blue,
Dark in the heraldry of Autumn's state,
And by high undern staring in amaze
We cry "The sun has come through! the sun is through!"

There reigns a rusty richness everywhere;
See the last orange roses, how they blow
Deeper and heavier than in their prime,
In one defiant flame before they go;
See the red-yellow vine leaves, how they climb
In desperate tangle to the upper air;
So might a hoyden gipsy toss and throw
A scarf across her disobedient hair.
See the last zinnias, waiting for the frost,
The deadly touch, the crystals and the rime,
Intense of colour, violent, extreme,
Loud as a trumpet lest a note be lost
In blackened death that nothing can redeem;
They make the most of moments that remain,
And with the florid dahlia, ruddy stain,
Endorse the sun-clock's motto, sour and plain:
THE WHOLE OF LIFE IS BUT A POINT OF TIME.

AUTUMN

See the red dogwood, lacquered by the rain.
That's tough, that's savage, that will stand the strong
Usage of Winter till the Spring again
Clothe with less lovely leaf its Indian vein.
But through the days too short and nights too long
Slow damage works, as age upon our span,
Damping or withering the clumps of green,
Wet bundles now of sad and sodden tan.
How tall they were, how quick of growth, how keen,
How bravely they began,
How bravely met the full meridian
Challenge of high young life, that now are brown,
Dirty with waning bindweed and with vetch
At year's end as at last we cut them down,
Playing the part of death, that soon ourselves will fetch.

(Yet, for a moment, in these dying days,
St. Luke will bring his little Summer, when
Faith may restore the tired hearts of men,
Ready to doubt but readier to believe.
Oh sweet St. Luke, so happy to deceive!
Evangelist, he brushes with his pen
A golden light in strokes of golden rays
From Heaven fanning down upon the maize
Strewn through the dust-motes to the pheasants, in
The orchard where the yaffle and the jays
Streak a bright feather as they take to wing.
And as in February hints of Spring
Cozen us into courage, so this late
Golden revival, in a last reprieve,
May stay the hour to wait,
As in the shadows Death
Slides back the moving sword within the sheath.)

THE GARDEN

*The faded spinster, soft in gray,
Bends to the old romantic stone;
She reads the words that kindly say
'The heart not always lived alone.'
Set in her flowers of today
The dial speaks of other flowers
When she was prettier than they,
And laughed at shadows and at showers,
Knowing that sun succeeded rain,
Being in love, and loved again,
(That rare return of mortal gift,
That rare, sweet closure of the rift
When 'me and mine' is 'us and ours'.)*

I NUMBER NONE BUT SUNNY HOURS.

*She loves the motto with its dear
Suggestion that all things are well;
Within her heart it rings a clear
Tinkle of sentimental bell.
Others may heed the voice of fear,
The wild beast lurking in the lair,
The heads that frightful may appear
In floating masks upon the air;
But not for her the line that saith
ONE HOUR WILL BE THE HOUR OF DEATH;
The graven words, too true, too plain,
Too fraught with an alarm insane,
And not for her the line too bare
That saith OF THE LAST HOUR BEWARE.*

BRIGHT SOL AND LUNA TIME AND TIDE DOOTH HOLD;
Bright Sol doth shine the dial with his gold,

AUTUMN

But the companion pencil slews a line
In tortoise-travel, fatal, and so fine
No thicker than a hair, a stroke of ink:
IT IS ALREADY LATER THAN YOU THINK.

THE SHADOW TEACHES, better than the light;
The pilgrim hours go by, as thread by thread
The moving pointer eats our little day
Till it be eaten nearly all away
And nothing left us but the final shred.

AND HOW WE GO MAY SHADOW SHOW.

SOONER OR LATER ALL MUST GO.

Then comes reprieving night, forgetful sleep.
Surely the gnomon's shadow cannot creep
Across the dial in a dark so deep?
Oh pitiable man, you have forgot the moon.
What of the moon, that spectral sun of night,
White shepherd of the tides and folded sheep?
She is your orb of night-time, that may sweep
Her midnight shadow as the shade of noon.
You are not safe, by noon-day or by night;
Light's dangerous, no safety is in light;
Dark's dangerous, no safety is in night;
No safety there, since the prescriptive moon
Of lovers cuts our moments into slice
Even in most romantic nights of June,
And measures them in minutes too precise.

She marks our passage, even as the sun,
And in the waste of sleep our life is half-way done.

THE GARDEN

So does the shadow of the cypress veer
On terraces that meet the trysting moon;
Great lawns or water, raven looking-glass,
Shot-silk of crawling black and malachite
Level and deep and dark.

The liquid or the verdurous lagoon
Deserted register the moving mark,
The silent blade that scythes far more than grass,
Noiseless, remorseless, and too cold to sear.
Tenebrous transit, thieving hour and year
The while we sleep, as though we were not here.
Only the statue, mossed in ancient green,
Eternal in her marble, sure, serene,
Watches, or does not watch, with calm surmise
Events that she has seen, or has not seen,
Passing before her blind indifferent eyes.

Low sinks the sun, and long the shadows fall.
The sun-clock, faithful measurer of time,
Fixed to man's dwelling on his flimsy wall
Or tabled flat on curving pedestal
Amongst his dying flowers, tells the last
Hours of the year as to a funeral,
With silent music, solemn and sublime.
Now is the sunlight ebbing, faint and fast
In intermittent gleams that seldom cut
Throughout the day the quadrant of our fate
With the slow stroke that says TOO SOON... TOO LATE...
The stroke that turns our present to our past.
BEWARE, THE OPEN GATE WILL SOON BE SHUT.

November sun that latens with our age,
Filching the zest from our young pilgrimage,

AUTUMN

Writing old wisdom on our virgin page.
Not the hot ardour of the Summer's height,
Not the sharp-minted coinage of the Spring
When all was but a delicate delight
And all took wing and all the bells did ring;
Not the spare Winter, clothed in black and white,
Forcing us into fancy's eremite,
But gliding Time that slid us into gold
Richer and deeper as we grew more old
And saw some meaning in this dying day;
Travellers of the year, who faintly say
How could such beauty walk the common way?



